None has understood you, but I understand you.
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Characters:
Todd Anderson, Neil Perry (Dead Poets Society), Parents of Neil Perry (Dead Poets Society), Steven Meeks, Charlie Dalton, John Keating, Gerard Pitts, Richard Cameron, Knox Overstreet, Jeffrey Anderson (Dead Poets Society), Thomas Perry, Ginny Danburry, Chris Noel, John Keating's wife

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Friends to Lovers, Fluff and Angst, Gay Neil Perry (Dead Poets Society), Gay Todd Anderson, Period-Typical Homophobia, POV Multiple, Introspection, Not Canon Compliant, My First Work in This Fandom, First Kiss, Love Confessions, Internalized Homophobia, Mental Health Issues, Depression, TW: Mr Perry, Charlie Dalton Is A Good Friend, Mutual Pining, Not Actually Unrequited Love, Slow Burn, Protective Charlie Dalton, Keating loves his students, Protective Jeffrey Anderson, but from afar, Todd Anderson Needs A Hug, Neil Perry and Charlie Dalton friendship, Steven Meeks is queer, Miscommunication, Suicidal Thoughts, Period-Typical Sexism, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Suicide Attempt, Fix-It, Flashbacks, Todd Anderson/Neil Perry-centric, Alternate Universe - Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies, Everyone is Queer, not cameron tho, he's confused, Not confirmed in fic yet but, Bisexual Charlie Dalton, Bisexual Knox Overstreet, Pitts is Meeksexual, Father Figure John Keating, Potential sequel in the works, one day,

maybe not soon, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, Sharing a Bed, There Was Only One Bed, Angst with a Happy Ending, Bullying, (in the past), Todd Anderson Is in Love, Neil Perry (Dead Poets Society) Is in Love

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None has understood you, but I understand you.

by tooyoungtobeold

Summary

“They can’t know. No one can ever know.”

Just two boys battling their inner demons, eventually finding solace in one another.

A story of the pressure of expectation, of friendships deeper than blood, and of the kind of love that saves you… just slowly.

A slow-burn fix-it fic, full of introspection and multiple POVs from friends and foe alike.

Mostly canon-compliant… until it isn’t of course.

Title from Walt Whitman’s “To You”.

Notes

This is my first fic from DPS fandom but I’ve been here the whole time I promise.

I’m not American myself so may misuse American phrases!

Chapter 1: Chapter 1.

Todd.

Keating's class is the only time Todd feels like he can actually breathe at Welton. It's strange, he never cared much for poetry at his old school, never thought it was for him. But here it comes easier, like it's been waiting for him all along. The Captain has a way of turning what would be dry lectures from anyone else into something alive. Even if he does terrorize Todd on the regular, pushing him to read his poems aloud. Especially now that he's decided Todd has "a gift straight from the mind of Walt Whitman." It's humiliating. Terrifying. And yet… it's getting easier. Kind of.

If it weren't for Keating, and the Dead Poets of course, Welton would be sheer torture. Todd's doing fine in his other classes…mostly. Well, all thanks to Meeks, who might be the best tutor he's ever had. And, somehow, Todd's starting to feel like he belongs in the group. Even Charlie's given him a bit of a break lately, which is saying something.

But here's the problem. He can't stop staring at Neil.

It's not on purpose. He knows it's weird, maybe even wrong, how his eyes keep finding Neil across the room, how he gets caught up in every detail. The way Neil's eyes catch the light when he smiles. The way he throws himself into everything. Every line he recites from his latest script, every gesture, like he doesn't know how to do anything halfway. He moves like he's weightless, like joy is stitched into his bones. It's impossible not to look. Impossible not to notice how beautiful he is….

No. He can't think like this. Not again. He knows what happened last time, his last school…. and he can't afford to lose this. Keating, the Poets, the fragile belonging he's finally found. They can't know what he is.

Neil.

They can't know who he really is.

Neil sits across from his parents. Sunday. The day of rest. Yeah, right. Sundays in the Perry household aren't rest, they're performances. Luckily he knows a thing or two more about those.

"Family day," his mother calls it, but it's really just another stage, another costume. The day he has to wear the mask:

NEIL: THE FUTURE DOCTOR.

Not Neil the good friend, or the actor, or the poet, or the boy who wants to breathe.

"So, enjoying AP Science, son?" His father's voice cuts sharp through his thoughts. Neil sighs inwardly, pastes on his brightest, most practiced smile.

"Yes, sir. It's been… informative."

Mr. Perry huffs like the word is a personal insult. "It had better be more than informative, son. You will have the top grade this year if it kills you. Mr. Meeks has been unbearably smug at Bridge lately. He's convinced that dreadful boy of his is smarter than you are."

Neil swallows the urge to roll his eyes. Instead, with all the politeness he can muster, he interrupts. "Sir, Meeks is clever. One of the cleverest boys I know. But don't worry. I'm going to work really hard again this year. I promise."

It doesn't matter. It never matters. He could be perfect. No, he is perfect, or close enough and it still isn't enough. It's never been enough. Not for his father. Maybe not for anyone.

If only he were back at Welton now, in the dorms. In the bed across from Todd, laughing at something stupid, something small, something real. The boy with the crinkle in his eyes. The button nose. The pretty smile.

The thought makes his heart stumble. He crushes the flutter of wings in his chest as soon as it rises. He scolds himself. Hard. No. He can't think like that.

They can't know.

No one can ever know.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I fear I am not a poet, just pretend Todd's poem is brilliant x

"There is no virtue, no beauty in man or woman, but as good is in you,

No pluck, no endurance in others, but as good is in you,

No pleasure waiting for others, but an equal pleasure waits for you.

As for me, I give nothing to any one except I give the like carefully to you."
— Walt Whitman, To you.

Todd.

Sometimes Todd hears Neil cry. Neil thinks he can't.

He does it quietly, to his credit. But Todd knows the sound of hidden grief. The muffled sobs, the sharp inhale, the shoulders trembling under a blanket. He knows the art of pretending to sleep, knows how silence can be a shield.

He knows it all too well.

The first time is after the very first Dead Poets meeting. Neil had gone out of his way to include him, even though Todd had been certain he was useless. An anchor dragging down any group unlucky enough to be stuck with him. But Neil hadn't cared.

Neil never seemed to care about Todd's silences or stammering. He'd been kind from the very beginning. Gentle, even. Todd had known of him long before they met. His father had always spoken highly of the Perrys. He knew them from Church and would often lament how perfect they seemed.

"A fine family, Todd. You'd do well to get in with their boy. Now that

is a success story. Just like our Jeffrey. Strong, intelligent, polite. And not a bad connection, either. No, not a bad one at all. Yes, you'd do well to get to know him."

But Todd had mistrusted his father's words. Every boy who fit that description; strong, intelligent, polite had made his life hell at his last school. He'd been sure Neil would be no different.

And then Neil smiled at him. Truly smiled. Drew him in, introduced him to his friends, made space for him like it was the most natural thing in the world. From that moment Todd was lost, whether he admitted it or not.

But no. He can't… he can't.

That night, after the meeting, Todd had felt lighter than he could ever remember. The Dead Poets had been funny, loud, welcoming. The poetry had felt like stepping out of his body, like floating free. Keating's classes were freedom, yes. But the Dead Poets….. that was living inside the art itself.

Which was why it had startled him when he rolled over in his bunk and heard Neil's quiet sobs. Hidden under the covers, careful, muffled. Neil, who never seemed sad.

Neil, who was joy itself. Sunshine made flesh. An angel, maybe.

Careful, Todd.

But still, something was wrong. Something Todd couldn't reach or comprehend. It wasn't every night. Not even every week. But often enough that Todd came to know the rhythm of it. The silence, then the stifled sounds of Neil breaking apart in the dark.

He could hardly bear it.

Neil.

He could hardly bear it.

Todd was up there. Keating had somehow convinced him to read his latest work aloud. A rarity, but one the whole class leaned into, of course the Poets, but even the other boys seemed caught by the moment.

Todd wasn't popular, not by a long shot. He still stuttered, still flushed crimson every time he spoke, still had to clamp his eyes shut just to force the words out. But when the words did come—

Neil was transfixed.

"I fade into the wild abyss,

men and women from afar jeering,

hollering as the reeds rip into my flesh,

tearing into my lifeline,

nothing to hide now, no bliss,

slowly sinking into the waves below,

cursed to never reach the shore,

then you,

grabbing me from the sapphires above,

aghast as our arms entwine,

I'm stitched again but never healed,

none to ever see me again."

It was rough. Imperfect. Clearly a first draft. But the way Todd's voice carried it. The tremor in his breath, the soft flush high on his cheekbones as he stumbled to the end… made it something else entirely. Neil's eyes betrayed him. They always did.

He could feel it: the way he was looking at Todd. The softening. The way his pupils must've swallowed his irises whole. The way his mouth hung open, useless. His cheeks burning pink, goosebumps prickling

down his arms.

God, he hoped no one was watching him.

Charlie is the first to break the silence, clapping loud, hollering with glee and standing. “CARPE DIEM, YESSS!”

Meeks and Pitts follow, then the rest of the class. Laughing, cheering, hooting at the red-faced Todd, who’s fumbling over himself, muttering, “It’s not that good, I-I know I can do better, I—”

Keating steadies him with a hand on his back, murmuring encouragements, grounding him the way only Keating seems to know how.

But Neil…. Neil can’t move. He can’t do anything but stare.

His heart races, traitorous. He tells himself to snap out of it, to look away, to stop. And yet….

The sound of Todd’s voice when he reads his poetry lingers like music. More beautiful than any sonnet, more haunting than Shakespeare himself. And it’s Todd’s. Todd’s words, Todd’s voice. That alone makes it better than all the rest.

The shame snaps him out of it. It always does. Just the thought of his father seeing him like this, seeing who he really is at Welton, is enough to smother it all.

How he is with Todd…

Neil shudders, forcing the thought away, shaking himself back into place. At last he joins in with the clapping, hoping his movements look natural, that no one noticed the delay.

And then Todd’s eyes find his. Gentle, nervous, searching. Looking for something. Approval. Neil knows the boy admires him, anyone could see that much.

So he grins wide, raises both thumbs in the air.

Todd lights up, grins back, and mouths, “Carpe Diem!”

Neil laughs softly, but the thought lingers like a bruise: *Would Todd still admire me if he knew? If he saw?*

That night, he curls into himself under the covers, silent tears pressing

into his pillow. Todd seems to be asleep across the room.

Neil doesn't dare check.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3.

Chapter Notes

> I can't help it, I wrote this instead of sleeping. Some fresh perspectives now.

Charlie.

Charlie Dalton is a smart boy. He knows he's smart. It's why he rarely has to try in class. Trig… okay, maybe not Trig, but most other things? He coasts, and he knows it.

So what if he fucks around a little?

Keating's class is different, though. Charlie isn't a poet by any stretch, but the Captain actually *teaches*. He doesn't just drone on from the front of the room, doesn't make them parrot the textbook or scribble notes from the projector.

Most teachers at Welton are lazy as hell, if you ask Charlie. Not that anyone *does* ask him, but he's happy to tell them anyway. They never appreciate it, but it's true: the teachers get away with the bare minimum just because they think they're superior.

The Captain isn't like that. He treats them as equals, without ever losing control of the room.

Charlie respects him for that. He still messes around, sure, but less than in any other class. He cares more here.

But he isn't a poet. Never will be. Doesn't care to be.

Todd Anderson, though. Todd was born for this. Anyone with half a brain can see it.

But not just anyone notices how Neil reacts when Todd opens his mouth.

Charlie isn't just anyone.

Neil Perry has been his best friend since … diapers. There's no version of the world where Charlie hasn't known Neil. Which is exactly why

he knows when something has shifted.

He saw it the first time Todd was forced to read in Keating's class, the Captain covering the boy's eyes and pushing him gently around the room until the words tumbled free. Charlie had been stunned. Up until then, Anderson had barely spoken to any of them. Then suddenly … Shakespeare incarnate, standing right in front of them.

Charlie had turned, automatically seeking Neil's reaction, the way they always did when something knocked them sideways.

But Neil's eyes weren't on him.

They were locked on Todd. Wide, unblinking, breath caught. Puppy-dog eyes in full swing.

Charlie had never seen that look on his best friend's face. Not once.

Girls had always noticed Neil. Of course they had - he was handsome, the kind of boy who turned heads without trying. But Neil never seemed interested.

Too focused on studies, on chasing roles, on chasing life. He never courted. Never flirted. Even when Charlie tried to set him up with friends-of-girlfriends, Neil brushed it off.

And he had certainly never looked at girls like that.

Something clicked.

Oh.

Charlie wasn't stupid. But he wasn't cruel either. This wasn't something to joke about, not something to shove into the light.

But Neil would come to him one day. Charlie was sure of it.

Tom Perry.

Sunday. Family day. The day Tom's son comes home for church and dinner.

Tom Perry has always known Neil would be a great man. *Must* be a great man.

Tom himself had grown up with nothing. No encouragement, no expectations. Nothing. His father, Rodger Perry, was a drunk, a recluse, a cruel man through and through. Tom swore he'd never be like that. He would raise his son better. He would demand greatness from him.

And yet Neil… Neil was always too soft.

The boy should be bold. Tenacious. A presence that filled the room. He should know the power he holds, even flaunt it now and then. Instead, Neil wastes his energy on being fair, generous, kind.

Always kind.

Tom doesn't want a bully for a son, not exactly. But he does want a man. And Neil's softness… it frightens him. The world isn't gentle. *Medicine* isn't gentle. In a few short years Neil will be on his own, and Tom doubts whether his boy has the edge it takes to survive.

People are always telling him, *"Oh Tom, that boy of yours, what a joy! What a light! You must be so proud."*

And yes, he is proud. Neil is intelligent. Driven. Successful in most things he sets his mind to.

But still too soft. Always too soft.

This afternoon they sit across from each other at the table. Neil is rattling off stories to his mother about Welton, little anecdotes that Tom can't see the use in.

"And your new roommate, Neil?" his wife asks, smiling. "What's he like?"

Neil's expression flickers, something unreadable passing across his face.

"Oh, Todd? Yeah, he's a nice kid. A little shy, but I've been trying to encourage him."

Tom sighs. There it is again. Always the caretaker. Always Mother Teresa.

“The boy probably needs Welton’s discipline,” Tom says, clipped. “I hear he’s a soft touch. Not like his older brother. Did you know Jeffrey Anderson graduated at the top of his class? You’d do well to aim that high, son.”

Neil nods, staring at his lap. “Yes, sir.”

The words are obedient, but the heart isn’t there. Still, Tom hopes the message lands.

Neil won’t get anywhere in life trailing after the likes of Todd Anderson.

Tom will make sure of that.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4.

Chapter Notes

> Ok another chapter within 24 hours is crazy but forgive me, I feel inspired.
>
> If you're curious about the timeline - it does kind of ping pong but mostly this is set between when Neil gets the role of Puck and the play, which I will get to. But never fear. You're in safe hands with me.

Keating.

John Keating has one goal, and one goal only: to make sure at least some of his students leave Welton free from the crushing weight of "greatness."

Of course, he hopes they go on to do meaningful things. The world needs doctors, lawyers, surgeons, bankers… hell, even teachers. He chuckles to himself at that last one.

But more than that, he hopes that the boys who chase prestige do so out of their own passion, not because it was forced on them. And the ones who don't… he prays they are not punished for it.

He had hoped, quietly, that someone might stumble across the Dead Poets Society. He had a suspicion of which boys might be drawn to it.

Neil Perry. A talented boy, bright, polite, kind. Neil reminds John of a friend from long ago, someone with all the lightness in the world inside him, until Welton's weight pressed it out. A friend lost to conformity.

John had seen too many of those. Loving boys who became unrelenting men. He would not let it happen to Neil without a fight.

And Todd Anderson, another soul Keating marked from the beginning. Shy as they come. But Keating knows from experience that the shy ones often carry the deepest insights.

He remembers his own first year at Welton: Young John Keating, a boy too timid to speak, afraid of ridicule. It had taken friendship,

guidance, and time for John to realize he had a gift—to inspire, to ignite. He had been lucky. Too many of his peers were not.

This generation … these young men… they deserved better. They deserved a chance to seize life before it slipped away.

Carpe diem.

Each one of them had potential. Not least the newest members of the Dead Poets Society.

Knox Overstreet, a romantic through and through. Full of loyalty, hope, and courage of heart. Yes, a poet, but above all else a man destined to love and be loved.

Charlie Dalton, mischief-maker, chaos incarnate, but a good comrade. A friend who went above and beyond. Not a poet, not exactly, but a wordsman in his own brash, unfiltered way.

Steven Meeks, steady as they come. A natural teacher, not unlike Keating himself, endlessly patient. A boy who understood that no question was too stupid for him to give an answer.

Gerard Pitts. Quieter, harder to read. Unsure of himself, uncertain of the world. A blank slate, but one with promise.

Richard Cameron. The rule-follower. Not yet a pioneer, but full of drive, full of ambition. The boy could achieve great things. If only he found where his heart truly belonged. John intended to coax that out, in time.

He thinks again of Todd and Neil. Always paired in Keating's mind. Outwardly, they were so different, yet beneath the surface both burned with passions that threatened to spill over. Two sides of the same coin. Each lost to struggles John could only guess at. But the light in their eyes when they were in his class, in those rare moments of freedom, it gave him hope.

Yes. He had hope for those two.

And if he happened to notice how they seemed to orbit one another, how the rest of the room disappeared when the other was near… well. He chose not to notice. That wasn't his job.

But it did still make him smile.

Neil.

This isn't the first time. Charlie's brought girls to Dead Poets meetings before. Neil had only slightly minded.

The girls were always nice enough, never caused real trouble, but they distracted the other boys from what the meetings were supposed to be about.

This time is different. This time it *irks*.

It starts when Charlie brings more girls than usual.

Strike one.

The cave barely fits the Poets as it is, but with five extra bodies crammed in, everyone is pressed shoulder to shoulder.

One girl, a giggly thing with glasses, sets her sights on Neil. It's obvious, and it grates. She laughs every time he says the barest word, insists he's "*SOOO hilarious.*"

Strike two.

Annoying, yes, but tolerable. Girls tend to like him.

He knows he isn't unfortunate-looking.

Dark hair, dark eyes, a complexion that draws attention. Coming from a girls' school, she probably hasn't had much chance to talk to boys anyway.

Neil can forgive that.

What he can't forgive is the girl next to Todd.

She keeps finding excuses to touch him. Brushing hair out of his eyes, plucking at a loose eyelash, giggling, "*Oh, make a wish!*" When she laughs, she leans so far into Todd's space she's practically draped across him.

Strike three.

Of course she has the right. Todd is good-looking. It was inevitable a girl would notice. But seeing it, seeing it in front of him… makes the truth feel heavy.

Neil will never have that.

He'll never be free to reach out, to touch Todd in that way.

Todd would recoil. Maybe hate him. Maybe worse. The thought makes Neil's stomach turn.

Todd isn't cruel, not like that… but he'd pull away. He'd stop talking. The others would, too. Even Charlie.

That almost stings worse than Todd. His best friend would hate him.

It aches, but Neil reminds himself: this is reality.

Todd doesn't look interested, not really, but in the future there will be someone he does like. The day he'll marry a beautiful woman. He'll have children, maybe a son he'll ship off to Welton. Neil will just be a shadow in his memory, a half-forgotten roommate from "the good old days."

As for Neil's future… God only knows. There's no world where people like him get to live as they are. He already disappoints his father at every turn. But if Mr. Perry ever knew the truth? That would far worse.

Neil's eyes find Todd's then. Todd smiles, small and nervous, but it's there.

For now, that's almost enough

Todd.

Todd hates when girls come to the Dead Poets meetings. For one, reading out loud is already torture but add five more pairs of eyes and

it's unbearable. For another… there's always a girl all over Neil.

And Neil… Well, Neil is the most handsome boy Todd has ever seen. Perhaps the most handsome anyone has ever seen. Of course girls flock to him. How could they not?

Todd sees it every time they pass a group of girls on the rare weekends they are allowed to go into town. The nudges, the whispers, the pointing;

"*Such dreamy eyes, such a beautiful smile*".

And Neil, always kind, always friendly, will flash them that grin. That grin that undoes Todd completely.

He knows exactly how those girls feel.

Neil's smile alone could fill volumes of anthologies. Todd thinks he could fill entire notebooks with poems about that little dimple near his mouth, the way his teeth catch his lip when he concentrates, the laughter that bursts out of him like the sunlight breaking through dark clouds.

The sound of it sparks something deep in Todd's chest, something he can't name.

When Todd helps him run lines, it's worse. He has to drag his gaze away from Neil's mouth as Shakespeare spills from it, not spoken to Todd, not really, but close enough that Todd's heart stutters.

Neil catches his eye now, smiles. *God*.

The girl beside him is still trying to catch his attention but for now his gaze is on Todd and well … any attention from Neil… any look, any word… is enough for Todd.

Well almost enough.

The girl beside Neil could have more. She could have *everything*.

It's not fair.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5.

Chapter Summary

Some brotherly love for each boy.

Chapter Notes

This was written at the same time as the last chapter but figured it would end up too long so enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jeffrey.

Jeffrey is the golden child. He knows he is.

He loves his parents, really loves them, but he feels for Todd. His baby brother, always caught in his shadow.

Todd is a kind-hearted boy, one Jeff has always been secretly fond of. But the brothers were never exactly encouraged to be close. Todd seems to see Jeff as something beyond comprehension, someone to admire, to aspire to.

That's not what Jeff wants to be to him.

The age gap doesn't help. Eight years is a gulf when you're young. By the time Todd was old enough to play, Jeff was already halfway out the door. On the rare occasions their parents went out and left Jeff to babysit, though… those were his favorite days. Todd would talk to him, really talk. They'd play fight, learn checkers and card games. For a few hours, it felt almost normal, like they were real brothers.

Then Welton swallowed him. Harvard followed. And Todd was more distant than ever by the time Jeff walked the graduation stage.

Breaks home from school never amounted to much. Todd always shut away in his room, Jeff buried in his own obligations.

Part of him had been relieved Todd didn't start at Welton right away. That place didn't tolerate quiet boys. Shyness was weakness, Nolan would sneer. Jeff had thrived there, sure, he was made of strong stuff,

but Todd? Todd would've been chewed up and spat back out.

Balincrest was strict, yes, but nothing like Welton. Jeff thought it safer. And still, even there, he heard stories; slurs, jeers, boys tearing into Todd. Jeff couldn't protect him. He hated himself for that. He was a failure of a big brother.

He'd suspected for a long time that Todd was… different. Sensitive, yes, but also in the way he watched other boys and didn't bat an eyelid at any girls.

Their parents never noticed of course. They never noticed anything about Todd. To them he was an accident, a shadow, an extension rather than a child. When Jeff tried to raise the bullying, they brushed it off.

"*Boys will be boys*," Their dad would say. *"A little roughhousing is healthy, builds character.*"

They didn't get it. It wasn't ideal, Jeff wasn't pleased with the school but anywhere was better than Welton.

But then their parents insisted. Two years, they said. Welton would transform Todd from timid mouse into a force to be reckoned with.

Ha. Fat chance.

Yet, to Jeff's surprise, letters came back full of new names. Friends. A roommate, Neil Perry, supposedly a star student, almost as excellent as Jeff himself.

Jeff worried. He knew how boys could be. He feared they were using Todd, laughing at him behind his back. Until one alumni trip proved him wrong.

He hadn't told Todd he was coming. Last thing his brother needed was to be paraded around by the family trophy.

But walking across campus that afternoon, he spotted him.

Todd, on the dock with a tall, dark-haired boy. Must have been the Perry boy.

And Todd was laughing. Really laughing. Shouting over himself, eyes alight, his whole body open and alive. Perry was the same, staring at him with that same fondness, like the world had shrunk to just the

two of them. Mutually enamoured with one another. Jeff can see that much.

Jeff stood there a long moment, stunned, before smiling to himself, pride swelling in his chest.

Attaboy, Toddy, he thought. *Attaboy*.

Charlie.

The more Charlie looked, the more he noticed.

Todd's eyes trailing down Neil's torso in the locker room.

Neil finding small excuses to touch Todd… a bump of the shoulder, a tap of the finger, a lean across his back. All fleeting, all subtle.

But Charlie saw it all.

Todd laughing louder than anyone when Neil cracked a joke.

Neil insisting on Todd's inclusion in every plan, every scheme.

Their so-called line reading sessions that were really just hours spent on the dock, talking and talking, voices low, lost in each other.

It was clear as day.

Todd Anderson loved Neil Perry.

Neil Perry loved Todd Anderson.

What was also clear as day was that neither of them had the faintest clue the other felt the same.

The cave only sealed the deal for Charlie. He'd watched Neil pine silently while the girl flirted shamelessly with Todd, and Todd doing the same while another girl draped herself all over Neil.

Under any other circumstance, Charlie would've laughed himself sick. They were ridiculous, how could they be so blind to the obvious. But *this*… this was trickier.

Sure, he knew people like that existed. Everyone did. And everyone seemed to agree that it was abhorrent, foul, against nature, sinful.

But Neil wasn't any of those things. Neil was the best person Charlie knew.

Charlie loved him as much as a boy could love another boy platonically.

Neither of them had brothers by blood, but the two of them had been as good as brothers to each other for as long as Charlie could remember. That wasn't going to change. *Ever*.

The problem was figuring out how to let Neil know that.

To make sure he understood Charlie wasn't going anywhere. And doing so without coming across like he was trying to pry something out of him, or worse, sounding disapproving and scaring him off.

Subtlety had never been Charlie's strong suit.

He was born to be loud, disruptive, to shout everything from the rooftops. But even he knew this required delicacy.

And delicacy? That wasn't exactly his language.

He went to Knox first.

Now that was a prime candidate for delicacy. A complete sap. Uh - in the best way, of course.

"What's up, Knoxious?" Charlie announces, kicking the dorm room open and striding in like he owns the place.

"Jeez, Dalton, warn a guy!" Knox yelps, practically jumping out of his skin.

There's nothing scandalous to catch him at, he's just buried in his books, clearly deep in Latin Hell, but Charlie still cracks up.

"Ahhh, works every time. You're so jumpy, man." He throws himself onto Knox's bed, scattering papers in every direction. Knox groans, swatting at him, muttering about ruined order and misplaced notes.

Charlie waves him off, grinning.

“Question for ya,” he says, ignoring Knox’s scowl. “Would you say you’re a subtle man, Knoxy?”

Knox blinks, caught off guard. “Subtle in what way, Charlie?”

Charlie props his head up on his hand, smirking. “Like… delicate. Gentle. Able to handle… sensitive situations.”

Knox narrows his eyes, suspicious. “Sensitive situations, such as what?”

Charlie sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. How to even start this?

“Uh… say, in the *extremely hypothetical* scenario where your friend likes a…” He hesitates, eyes darting around the room. “Girl… who… let’s just say people would not approve of. Like, uh… she’s…” He waves his hands vaguely, searching for words that won’t exist. “Y’know. Complicated.”

Knox tilts his head, brows furrowed. He’s staring at Charlie like he’s trying to decipher code.

“Go on…”

“She’s a leper!” Charlie blurts, triumphant. *Brilliant. Nailed it.*

Knox just stares. Then scoffs. “Be serious, Charlie.”

“Not in my nature!” Charlie cackles, hands thrown up. “Okay, okay, maybe not a leper. But she’s… unconventional, alright? People don’t think she’s good for him. And he’s a great guy, a really great guy, and he won’t admit he likes the… girl.” Charlie trips over the word, but plows ahead. “And she is a great girl and clearly likes him too but neither will admit it and you just wanna let him know it’s okay. Without being… well, Charlie Dalton about it.”

Knox leans back in his chair, studying him with narrowed eyes, like he knows there’s more to this story than Charlie’s letting on.

After a pause, Knox deadpans, “Are you the guy who’s in love with a leper? Because honestly, I wouldn’t put it past you, Charlie.”

Charlie barks out a laugh, clutching his chest. “Knoxious, you wound me! A leper wouldn’t stand a chance against all this.” He gestures broadly at himself, grinning like a fool.

Knox cracks too, shaking his head. “You’re impossible.”

They both laugh, the tension easing for a moment, though Charlie’s brain is still spinning on the problem at hand.

“So,” Charlie says, leaning forward, suddenly uncharacteristically serious. “How do you… subtly let someone know you support them. No matter what. Leper and all?”

Knox studies him for a moment, then shrugs. “Honestly, Charlie? Just be straight with it. This hypothetical friend should know you well enough to tell when you’re serious. You joke, yeah. You mess around, yeah. But you’re loyal. Everyone knows that about you.”

Charlie blinks at him, caught off guard. Loyal, huh? That’s not usually the first word people reach for. He doesn’t care to admit that the sentiment moves him.

Knox continues, softer, “Just say they can talk to you about anything. That you’re there no matter what. Sure, they might figure out what you mean… but would that really be so bad?”

He isn’t sure.

Neil is delicate. That’s the part no one sees. On the surface he’s strength itself, he’s confident, powerful, a leader through and through. Kind, fair, the sort of boy who seems like he could handle anything.

But Charlie knows better. He knows the weight Neil carries around. The way Mr. Perry is with him… every word a command, every expectation a noose. One misstep and Neil could be packed off to military school before he could blink.

Charlie hates Thomas Perry with a passion. If he kept a hit list, that ugly, miserable, no good, shrivelled up old man would be right at the top.

But Charlie isn’t stupid.

He knows he can’t lash out, can’t let that rage slip. Their mothers may be childhood friends, but the Perrys would drop the Daltons in an instant if he crossed a line.

They’d forbid Neil from seeing him, cut them off completely.

And Charlie couldn’t risk that. Not when Neil needs him more than

ever.

Time for some further consultation.

Chapter End Notes

> “What did you say 'bout my brother? That's not a stray, that's my brother. You stay away from my brother”
>
> - Charlie Dalton probably

Chapter 6: Chapter 6.

Chapter Summary

Not much to say, only that Charlie is a joy to write.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil.

Another night in, sat side by side in their dorm.

Neil lives for nights like these. Just the two of them. Todd reading his latest poems while Neil lies back, listening, letting the words wash over him.

He's supposed to be giving feedback, but it never amounts to much more than:

"*Wow, Todd! That was so beautiful.*"

"*You're a true artist.*"

"*You need to get these published.*"

He's hardly eloquent. Todd seeks his approval regardless. The boy trusts him entirely too much. But it's worth it, to hear him read. To be close to him.

Tonight, as Todd reaches the last line of a poem about expectation and family obligation, Neil feels his eyes prick.

God, how Todd can get to him.

He doesn't understand the power Todd has, the way he reaches deep into Neil's mind and pulls every buried feeling into exquisite written form.

"Todd," he starts, raw and exposed, letting the boy see it all. "How… how do you do it? You just…"

Todd's nervous eyes meet his, unsure, anticipating criticism. He

needn't. Neil could never speak a negative word against him.

"You're just… you're *magic*, Todd."

He hadn't meant to say it, not like that. Neil freezes, nerves choking him. Hoping he doesn't read too much into it.

Todd's cheeks bloom red, breath catching. He laughs, a deflection, half-hearted, unable to meet Neil's gaze. "You flatter me…"

Neil bites the bullet. "Todd, I'm serious. You're the most gifted writer on the goddamn planet. Jeez, Whitman would have you knocked off, taking all his glory as the most celebrated American poet."

Todd laughs, finally meeting Neil's eyes. "Well, thanks, Neil. All this from the future Cary Grant!"

And just like that, it's Neil's turn to blush.

"Now, you really do flatter me. You haven't even seen me perform!"

Todd shakes his head. "Not officially. But as your number one, trusted line-reading partner, I have the authority to say you've got a gift."

His tone is light, but the sincerity lingers underneath.

He looks so beautiful like this. At dusk, face in half light, eyes crinkling at the sides the way Neil loves. Lips slightly open gazing at Neil with something fond in his eyes. Admiring.

Neil wants to touch him so badly, to grab his hand, to lean against him, to curl up beside him and never move. He can't do any of those things. So instead, he settles for a pat on the shoulder.

Boys can do that. Boys *do* that.

"Thanks, Todd." He practically whispers.

Their eyes meet again. And just like every other time, they're caught there, suspended in something unspoken. Neil aches to lean in, to bridge the small gap between them. To feel the softness of Todd's lips, his tongue.

He knows he can't. He *knows*.

And yet… he could swear there's something in Todd's gaze. Something quiet, something….

Todd leans ever so slightly closer, whether by accident or instinct, Neil can't tell. But the air between them tightens.

They're so close. Dangerously close.

And sway closer yet. Todd's eyes fall to Neil's lips… he *swears* they do…

And then…

And then….

The door slams open and Charlie barrels in, grinning.

The boys jerk apart like opposing magnets. Todd coughing and ducking his face, Neil awkwardly meeting his oldest friend's eyes, bracing for the worst teasing of his life. But that doesn't come.

Charlie just throws up his hands, laughing.

"Hey, it's chill, amigos! Don't mind me. Just here to announce that our dearest pal Knox found some whiskey and the rest of us are heading to the cave to chug some. You two wanna join?"

Neil, confused that he's somehow off the hook, nods. "Uh, yeah sure. I'll just finish up my Chem work and we'll be right there. Right, Todd?"

Todd, still red as a beet, nods quickly. "Um sure, I - uh. Yeah, I just have to call my parents. I'll be there after."

He rushes out, leaving Charlie and Neil alone.

Charlie smiles and after a beat turns to Neil.

"You know, Todd's really grown on me. I thought he was pretty boring at first…" When Neil starts to protest Charlie laughs, hands up in surrender. "Ok, ok, sue me! The kid doesn't exactly give himself much chance to show his true personality, I didn't know any better. But now … I know he's a good guy. Funny when he wants to be. Freaking talented as heck. And a good roommate to you. A really good one."

Neil frowns. That's not like Charlie, compliments, unprompted, about someone he barely knows.

"Uh, yeah… I like him. He's… a great friend."

Charlie gives him a knowing look. Neil isn't sure he likes it. Suspicion prickles at the back of his neck.

"It's always good to have friends. New and old." Charlie shrugs, but his tone stays earnest. "And he brings the best out of you. Have you noticed?"

"Well… sure. He uh…"

But Charlie barrels on. "I've known you a long time, Neil. Know you more than anyone. And yet, Anderson… I think he gets you on a different level. Beyond how I could get you. I think that's good for you. And I like him all the more for it."

Neil's breath catches. What is he insinuating?

He could be setting up for the worst teasing of Neil's life… but no, his face is calm. Besides Charlie is a lot of things. Mean is not one of them.

Charlie Dalton is actually, truly and honestly giving him a sincere pep talk.

Charlie pauses, watches his friend a few moments more before starting toward the door.

"Anyhoo, I'll tell Knox you two are joining us then. And hey… Neil?"

Neil meets his best friend's eye. "Yes?"

"Nothing can … or will ever change my opinion of you, Neil. Not one thing… Well, maybe if you became a cult leader. Though even that would probably have some benefits." Charlie chuckles at that, but his eyes stay steady.

"Seriously though. Not *one* thing, Perry. Promise."

And with that, he's gone.

Neil stares at the door in stunned silence.

Fuck. Neil thinks. He knows.

He *knows*.

Keating.

Two weeks prior.

Of all his students to attend office hours last thing on a Friday, Keating would have put Charlie Dalton dead last.

The young man was respectful enough… in his own way. And Keating knew Charlie had a fondness for him, even liked him, in a way he didn't seem to like the rest of the faculty.

Still, as John prepared to pack up his desk and retire to his room, the door burst open.

Dalton, clearly not a knocker, waltzed in.

Keating half expected some prank, or a cheeky question about the Dead Poets Society. But then he caught something in the boy's eyes. Serious, worried. It caught him off guard.

"Mr. Dalton, what a surprise! I was just finishing my office hours, but I've got a few more minutes. Did you need help with something?"

Charlie closed the door behind him.

"This thing lock?" he queried, ignoring Keating's question.

"It does indeed, Mr. Dalton. Though I usually only lock it when I take my afternoon nap. It's not generally advisable to lock it with students inside."

Charlie shrugged. "It's something I don't want people walking in on. Hearing me talk about, Captain. I…"

Keating frowned at the fretting boy, concern stirring. He drew a key from his desk, walked over, and turned the lock. Then he gestured

toward the armchair.

“Please, sit, Mr. Dalton.”

Charlie obliged, though not before snatching one of Keating’s candy bars from the desk. Keating chuckled.

Can’t be too dire, then.

“So,” he said, lowering himself into the chair opposite, “what seems to be the problem?”

Charlie hesitated.

“Charlie,” Keating said softly. He didn’t often use first names, and it made the boy look up, mildly amused. “This is a safe space. I promise. The floor is yours.”

Charlie visibly relaxed. Keating waited patiently, watching him chew on the words.

“So… here’s the thing. I need some… uh… advice, I suppose. Not anything boring or Welton-y, like how do you pay taxes or how do you find a suitable *dame* or whatever crap the others worry about.”

Keating huffed a laugh. The boy certainly did have a way with words.

“In fact this actually isn’t about *me*. Not exactly. It’s more…” Charlie shifted in his seat. “Captain… I’m not exactly known for my tact, would you not agree?”

Keating smiled. Certainly not. Tact was not one of Charlie Dalton’s many fine qualities.

He nodded his agreement, making the boy laugh.

“And the matter is… delicate. It’s not mine to share in full. But I have a friend. A *really* great friend who I’ve known my whole life. You’ll probably know who I mean, and I’m sorry to him if this gives it away, but….”

Keating nodded slowly. He could already guess. “I wouldn’t dream of telling anyone anything you wouldn’t want known. You have my word, Mr. Dalton.”

That seemed to satisfy Charlie.

“My friend has always been the strong one. The one who helps others, anyone. Doesn’t discriminate. He’s… well, to put it bluntly, Keating, he’s fucking unbelievable.”

Keating smiled at the profanity, unable to feign disapproval.

Not his kind of teaching.

“But I feel like he’s always had to hide who he really is. From his family, from me, from … well, everyone. And… let’s say I figured out what that was. I won’t repeat it, but it’s something others might frown upon.”

Keating understood. He’d suspected the same thing, for some time. But he didn’t let it show.

“And I just really want him to know…” Charlie’s throat caught; he closed his eyes. Pausing. Keating waited, allowing him the space to compose himself. When he spoke again, his voice wavered.

“I want him to know how much I care about him. No matter what. Captain, he’s like family to me. And I know he needs support on this. Support I know his real family will never give to him… especially not his father.”

Keating felt something twist in his chest. He had always known Charlie’s bravado masked a heart that was loyal, tender, fierce. But to hear it spoken aloud like this… well it was rather touching to behold.

“How,” Charlie exhaled finally, “can I tell him this… without being such an idiot about it?”

Keating only took a moment before replying.

“Mr. Dalton, I feel you don’t have anything to worry about on that front.”

Charlie blinked. That clearly wasn’t the answer he’d been expecting.

“You are a funny man,” Keating continued, “rarely very serious. It’s actually rather admirable. To entertain, to move through life just as you are, unapologetic. But you are certainly not an idiot. This conversation alone has demonstrated how fiercely loyal you are. How much you are willing to do for a friend in need. How little you care for what the establishment thinks, what peers think, what you’ve been told your entire life to consider wrong.”

Charlie shifted in his chair, seeming restless. Keating's eyes softened.

"This alone is the center of my teaching," he said. "To question the norm. To think independently. And I must say, as your teacher, I am truly proud."

The words seemed to land heavier than Charlie wanted them to and Keating watched as tears pricked in his eyes. He quickly looked down, fiddling with the wrapper of the candy bar.

"You have every capability of using your own words," Keating pressed on. "From the heart. From the poet I know lies deep within you."

Charlie scoffs at that, but Keating isn't finished. Leans forward, voice quieter now.

"Whatever you choose to say, it *can't* be polished. It can't be rehearsed. You must choose a time that feels right, when you and your friend are alone, and safe. And speak from the heart. Like a mighty yawp from within."

Charlie gave a short laugh at that, half-nervous, half-genuine.

"Your friend knows you," Keating said firmly. "He would want you and you alone, in all your glory, to tell him how much he means to you. You have nothing to fear, Mr. Dalton. You have it within you already. And I know he will appreciate it."

He sat back then, letting the words hang.

"There will be fear. There will be doubt. But just stand tall. Stand strong. And stand by him."

At that, Charlie allows a single tear to fall.

Instead of offering a handkerchief, Keating pushes the rest of his candy bars toward the student.

Charlie takes them, grinning, sniffling, wiping his eye quickly.

"Now, best get back to your dorm before I'm accused of inappropriate behavior."

The pair laugh, and Charlie leaves, a quiet "*Thank you*" slipping out as he goes.

Keating locks up and retires to his own room.

Before he sleeps, he thinks to himself: How lucky is Neil, to have such a friend?

Hope.

He feels it again, strong and steady. His students will be just fine out there.

Welton can’t crush them all.

Chapter End Notes

My fave running gag I have is Charlie just entering a room unannounced.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7.

Chapter Summary

A little Todd centric chapter for you.

Todd.

1957-1958

Balincrest wasn't exactly Todd's parents' dream for him. They spent countless days, weeks, months leading up to the start of high school trying to convince him otherwise.

"If you'd just try for Welton, you could do great things!"

And:

"Todd, just look at Jeffrey- all he's achieved. That's all thanks to Welton!"

And, of course:

"*You need to apply yourself, boy. Welton has the finest scholars. The finest students. You could be one of them one day."*

Blah blah blah.

Here's the thing: Todd didn't really want to go to *any* prep school. But he especially couldn't bear the thought of being in the same school where he'd not only be compared to Jeffrey by his parents, but also by every peer and teacher.

At least Balincrest, the second most prestigious school, would give him a blank slate. He wouldn't be *Todd Anderson: the baby brother of the great Jeffrey Anderson.* He'd just… be.

His parents were disappointed, of course, but they came around. In the end, whichever school could board their son and keep him out of their way was good enough.

Todd knew they didn't have much love for him. In fact, they didn't seem to like him much either. He had simply always been "there"; a bonus child.

Always second to Jeff. Always too quiet, too… sensitive.

Jeff had been their every hope, dream, pride, and joy. Their miracle, after several child losses and failed pregnancies.

And Jeff… Jeff just seemed to get life. He soared through every endeavor, enjoyed applying himself, enjoyed being a scholar. And he was good at it, too.

Mr. and Mrs. Anderson were in awe of their golden boy. Now, in his twenties, finishing up grad school. Yes, Jeff was everything they wanted.

They didn't need Todd. He knew this much and tried not to care.

He wasn't exactly a fan of his parents either. They weren't warm people, not even to Jeff, not really. They revered their eldest son, but reverence isn't the same as affection.

But Jeff didn't seem to need it. Affection, warmth, it seemed to suit him just fine to go without. He had his studies, his friends at Welton, and his endless drive to succeed.

Friends never came easy to Todd. He was painfully aware of the fact. Around peers, he could barely manage two stumbling words before clamming up.

Solitude had always been his safe place. He was alone at home, and that suited him just fine.

Elementary school had been… tolerable. A few kids from church and kindergarten would sometimes let him tag along. Not exactly friends, but enough to pass the time. Most kids left him alone. Sure, he'd get called a pansy, a stiff, a fairy, but he learned how to handle it. Eyes on his boots, ears closed, pretend it didn't sting.

Balincrest, though… Balincrest was different. Harder. From the very first day, it was like a switch had flipped. Todd went from being overlooked to being the prime candidate for torment.

It started one lunch break. Todd's eyes had drifted across the hall, catching on an older student. Tall, dark, handsome, laughing at a friend's joke, head tipped back, light catching his features just so.

Beautiful.

Todd's chest had fluttered, a feeling he couldn't name, couldn't control. He prayed his gaze betrayed nothing. That no one noticed.

Someone did.

Max Thompson. Loud, popular, rich. The kind of boy who thrived on being at the center of things. He'd been watching, it seemed. Waiting for Todd to slip, to reveal himself. Ready to pounce.

The first blow came as a lunch tray to the back of Todd's head. The second, in words. Slurs spat across the hall, sharp and cruel. Laughter rising around them as the others joined in, cheering Max on.

And that was the beginning of it.

Boys training behind him. Making kissy-noises. Calling him a degenerate.

It wasn't just words. Books hurled at him in the corridors. Shoved to the ground during soccer practice. His locker broken into, contents scattered, ruined.

His parents needn't know. They wouldn't have cared anyway. His father believed a little teasing would toughen him up. It never did.

So Todd kept his head down. *Fade away. Focus on studies. Don't get noticed.* That was the goal.

Don't perceive me, he'd think. *Don't notice me.*

It was no use. He was the target alright. All throughout his first year, into his second. Not only from Max, but from almost everyone.

Teachers might scold in passing, but never stopped it. Never cared that Todd was the one at the center of every slur, every punch, every kick.

Every day it worsened. More words, more blows.

Hide away, Todd. They can't know. They can't ever know.

Don't look at other boys, Todd. Never at other boys. Suppress. Always suppress.

When his parents raised the idea of Welton again at the end of his sophomore year… he considered it. More than considered it.

A fresh start.

I won't be weird this time, he promised himself. *I won't show them who I am.*

So he agreed. Welton would be hard, sure, always in Jeff's shadow, always the bonus child. But what else was new?

He was determined. *I'll hide away this time.*

No one would ever know. Not ever again.

Neil.

Now that Neil knew, without a doubt, that Charlie Dalton knew. Knew how he felt about Todd… knew what he was… he realized, more than ever, how little the fact mattered to his friend.

Charlie didn't change a thing about how he treated Neil. Not an ounce. If anything, he teased him *less*. Patted his shoulder more. Showed his appreciation more openly. Asked if he needed help with lines, or a scene partner before rehearsals.

Neil appreciated the sentiment, though that role belonged to Todd alone. Charlie seemed to respect that.

Speaking of Todd, Neil noticed something else, his oldest friend softening toward the boy. Cheering louder and louder when Todd read his poetry in class or in the cave. Talking to him more. Not just in jest. Asking how he was finding his classes, laughing with him about something stupid Nolan said.

It warmed Neil inside.

He still didn't fully understand. How did Charlie know? How obvious had Neil been? No one else seemed to notice. So perhaps it was that strange brotherly intuition they'd always had.

As kids, Neil always knew when Charlie was upset, and Charlie the same. They synced with each other's moods like clockwork. Charlie

was a little shit at times, even then, but never *gave* Neil shit.

He should've known he couldn't lose Charlie that easily. He simply couldn't believe his luck.

One evening, in the cave, Charlie stepped forward… or rather, Nuwanda stepped forward.

"And now, my dear, gentle Dead Poets! I, Nuwanda, proffer a reading. A dramatic rendition of a sweet poem by our revered Walt Whitman."

Walt Whitman?? Neil and Todd's eyes met, equally startled. Charlie wasn't one to read classics at the meetings. He was more partial to limericks, or those ridiculous poems he swore he found in Playboy. Always entertaining, rarely profound.

"You may ask yourselves, gentlemen—why, pray, is our dearest Nuwanda, our god amongst men, our revered deity—"

"Oh boy," Meeks cut in, earning a flipped-off hand from Charlie and a wave of laughter from the others.

Charlie pressed on, grinning. "Why is it that Nuwanda is reading such a dull piece… I jest, I jest."

"Whitman *isn't* dull," Todd said, quiet but firm enough to cut through the noise.

Neil's heart skipped. God, he loved when Todd found his voice, even in something as harmless as a jab at Whitman. It was bravery, in its own small way. And Neil felt the warmth of it ripple through him.

Charlie grins at Todd, wide and genuine, and Todd grins back. Finally comrades. Neil thinks his heart can't take it.

"Without further ado, my dearest Dead Poets. This is Nuwanda's rendition of I Sing the Body Electric,by Walt Whitman… who is definitely not dull."

Todd titters appreciatively, and Charlie shoots him a wink before launching in. He spreads his arms wide, his voice booming against the cave walls, exaggerating every syllable like he's already on stage at the Globe.

The boys are all laughing and hooting at his performance, but Neil can't help but feel moved, yet again.

Charlie is bringing himself into Todd's world. That much is clear. Whitman, a favourite of Todd's, one that Charlie had always deemed boring and yet has gone out of his way to memorise. This poem feels like a gesture.

A message to Neil, in a sense. One that says: *I approve of him.*

As Charlie reads the last lines of the poem, he watches Neil. And something in his eye tells Neil his assumption is correct.

"*The exquisite realization of health;*

O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,

O I say now these are the soul!"

With that, Charlie takes a bow as the poets cheer. Todd louder than all of them.

Neil watches him and smiles.

Something feels lighter inside Neil today.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Todd.

Todd dreads this day each year.

Jeffrey's birthday. Not even a milestone one this time. Just twenty-five. Halfway to thirty. Already a success in his field.

Todd doesn't want to resent him. He really doesn't. Jeffrey is, by all measures, a nice person. Polite, civil. Not cruel or bragging. Self-confident, yes, but not arrogant. Just confident in a way Todd knows he'll never be.

The real sting is that his parents always let Todd's own birthday slip by unnoticed. A single gift, usually thoughtless. The same desk set two years running. No greeting card. No cake.

But *God forbid* Jeffrey's day pass without its annual performance. A full-scale gathering at the Anderson house, family friends, relatives traveling in, his father carving a ham, a frosted cake placed reverently on the table.

On those days Todd might as well be invisible. He's required to attend, but not acknowledged. Just present.

He laments the fact to Neil about a week before the party, sprawling across his bed in a dramatic pose while Neil hovers above him, amused.

"Hey, at least after next week you won't have to think about it again for a whole year." Neil, ever the optimist.

Todd sighs. "Yes, I know. I'm just dreading seeing all my relatives, especially now that I'm at Welton. It'll be all…" He sits up a little, pitching his voice high and wavering, an imitation of a shrill elderly aunt: "'*Ooooh, Toddy, I hear you're getting B's in Chemistry. Jeffy once scored a hundred percent on his Chemistry quiz. You should be just like him*!'"

Neil bursts out laughing, caught completely off guard by Todds impression. His whole face lights up, dark eyes sparkling, dimples deepening.

Todd's chest clenches. His heart stutters. That laugh. *God*. The way Neil listens to him, really listens, like Todd is worth hearing…

It would be pure heaven, if it weren't also utter torture.

Something flashes across Neil's eyes then, an idea.

"Hey, are you allowed to bring a friend?" He grins, almost excitedly. "Need a wingman for all the aunts and uncles? I'm great with old people… or … so I'm told."

Todd blinks at him. His first instinct is to protest, to insist that Neil not throw himself into the lion's den on his behalf. But Neil's expression is so serious, so eager.

"Oh Neil, no… that's… wow, that's real nice of you but it would be so boring for you. Seriously, my family are as stiff as they come."

Neil just grins, that stubborn, determined grin Todd loves.

"C'mon Anderson, I enjoy a good challenge. Gotta practice feigning interest in boring conversations for my future Harvard interview, eh?"

Todd sits up straighter, his heart thudding a little faster. Neil would really do this… for what reason?

"W-well I can definitely ask… there's no rule against it. And there's always more than enough food to go around and… and I actually think you'd like Jeffrey… but you don't have to… I mean it's such a bother it's—"

"Todd." Neil cuts him off gently, voice steady, eyes fixed on him in that way that makes Todd feel almost unbearably seen. "Let me support you, eh? You deserve to have someone there. In your corner, huh?" Nudges him softly.

Todd swallows. His throat feels tight.

"And hey," Neil adds with a little laugh, lightening the moment, "my father will even approve. He wants me to aspire to the great Jeffrey Anderson's standard. I can frame it like I'm networking."

The laugh slips out of him easily, but Todd just stares.

Neil is so… he's so kind with Todd. He almost can't believe he's real. Sure, Neil is kind with everyone, there's not a bad bone in the boy's body. A good person, through and through.

But even Todd can see he's different with him than with the others. Goes out of his way for him more than he does for anyone.

Todd figures he must be like a kid brother figure to him or something… though sometimes the look in his eye when they're together…

No. He can't think like that.

Someone as perfect as Neil would never… *could* never see someone like Todd in that way.

Neil Perry is destined for a beautiful wife, the kind who belongs on a magazine cover. Someone polished, dazzling, the kind of woman who looks like she stepped out of a daydream. She'll stand by his side at dinners, smiling while Neil charms the room. She'll give him children he'll never be cruel to. Never like Mr. Perry. Neil will be a good father, a patient husband. That's who he is.

The thought twists something deep inside Todd, a sharp pang of sadness he doesn't dare name. But at least for now *he* gets to have Neil like this. In close quarters, every single day. To see that smile he loves so dearly every single day.

He wishes he could bottle the moment up. Bottle all their moments. With Neil, yes, but the other poets too. To keep them all suspended in this golden bubble of time, safe and unchanging.

So he supposes if Neil is offering this, truly offering this, he should take it. Another chance to be near him.

"Ok. I'll ask."

Neil grins at this, the kind of grin that lights up his whole face. Todd savors it, tucks it away somewhere private inside him, as though it's something precious meant only for him.

He wishes it was.

Neil.

Convincing his parents to go to the Andersons' shindig wasn't exactly difficult, but it wasn't easy either.

Mr. Perry hadn't liked the idea of Neil going off campus mid-term. Worse still, staying at the Andersons' that Saturday would mean missing the sacred Sunday "family day." And the Perrys were extremely serious about Sundays. His father treated them like law, the one day a week when Neil was expected to perform the role of dutiful son with no excuses.

On the other hand, Neil had plead his case carefully, like rehearsing for a play: he could network, schmooze with Jeffrey Anderson and his Harvard friends, plant the right seeds for the future.

That had sealed the deal.

His father, however, had not let him off without conditions. Neil could go, yes. But only if he returned after the party with at least three contact numbers of Harvard connections.

Neil had nodded, smiling politely, the way he always did. But inside, all he thought was: *three contact numbers*? Why was the man never satisfied.

If only his father knew that wasn't why he wanted to go.

He would definitely not approve of that.

Neil was unsure of what to expect from the Andersons. He certainly didn't think much of Todd's parents, just from what Todd had told him.

Taking him for granted, the same gift as last year… and this party felt like a slap in the face for Todd. The least Neil could do was be there for him. Show the boy that someone thought he was worth something. Back him up if he needed to.

When he and Todd arrived at the Anderson house, Neil couldn't help but marvel at the building.

It was big.

At least twice the size of his own family's place. He knew the Perrys weren't as wealthy as most Welton families, but he hadn't realised the Andersons were this well off.

At Neil's stunned stare, Todd looked sheepish.

"My uh… folks are pretty well off…" he muttered, stating the obvious.

Neil whistled. "Damn, Todd, and they still couldn't fork out for a car for your birthday?"

They both laughed at that, though Neil felt a pang of sadness. The fact made Todd's neglect all the more glaring. His parents had the money, had the means, but not the heart.

Still, Neil kept it light. He nudged Todd. "Hey, let's get this over with, shall we?"

Todd smiled half-heartedly and rang the bell.

They were an hour and a half early. Todd had said his parents always made him help set up. Besides, the boys had their overnight bags to lug upstairs before the guests arrived.

Mrs. Anderson answered the door the picture of domesticity, floral apron around a pretty dress, smiling politely. It looked almost rehearsed.

"Ah, Todd dear, finally. We need some help plating up the hors d'oeuvres."

To Neil, she extended her hand. "You must be Neil. My name is Jennifer, but everyone calls me Jenny. Thank you for coming. Your father tells us great things."

Neil shook her hand and bowed his head politely. "Thank you for allowing me into your home, Mrs. Anderson—"

"*Jenny*. I insist, dear." Her smile tightened as she glanced at Todd, who hadn't moved. "Son, aren't you going to show our guest to his room? Then, as I mentioned, we need all the help we can get in the kitchen. Hurry."

Todd obeyed, head down, and led Neil upstairs.

Neil follows in silence, but the image of Todd shrinking under his mother's words irks him.

He wishes he could reach out, take Todd's hand, tell him he shouldn't have to move through his own house like a guest… or the help. He'd caress his face. Make sure he knew how precious he was.

But he can't. He knows he can't.

The upstairs hallway is wide, lined with family portraits in gleaming frames. Jeffrey in his Welton graduation robes. Jeffrey in his Harvard robes. Jeffrey on a boat, Jeffrey with some shiny trophy. Jeffrey with his arm around a young woman, the picture of a polished couple.

They pass the study, door open, where a painting of Jeffrey as a child hangs above the fireplace, clearly the work of an expensive artist.

Neil's eyes flick instinctively from wall to wall, searching for a trace of Todd.

Finally, he spots one. A single photo, tucked at the very end of the row on the last stretch of wall.

Todd, maybe ten years old, shoulders hunched, smiling faintly at the camera. The frame is smaller. Dust gathers along its edges. Neil pauses to look closer.

He was a cute kid… he's a cute young man. But damn, he was sweet looking. Big shining eyes, a shy little smile showing once-gapped teeth.

Todd glances back, catches what Neil's looking at, and blushes.

"Oh, it's awful, isn't it? Mom insisted on putting it up. Wanted to even out the childhood photos."

Neil raises an eyebrow, gesturing toward Jeffrey's sprawling gallery of photographs. Even out? There needed to be at least 30 more photos of Todd to make it fair.

Todd scoffs and drops his gaze.

"It's fine." He insists.

It doesn't *feel* fine, but Neil doesn't push.

They climb the last flight to the attic room. Neil had expected a guest room, but to his surprise it looked lived-in. Todd's childhood bedroom.

Todd caught his eye and sighed.

“Yeah, sorry. The guest rooms are all full. We’ve got family staying too, so… you’re in here, I’m afraid.” He glanced around, clearly embarrassed.

Neil didn’t see anything embarrassing. A double bed, a shelf lined with books, a few action figures, and a violin resting in the corner.

“You play?” Neil asked, nodding toward it.

Todd shrugged. “Uh… a little. Haven’t really had the time since Welton.”

Neil grinned. “A man of many hidden talents. Todd Anderson, you are a dark horse.”

Todd gave him a playful shove, then gestured to the bed.

“You’ll be up here. Sheets should be fresh. I’ll be on the couch, probably. Mom doesn’t like making up a camp bed. Says it looks too cheap.”

Neil frowned. “Hey, no. I can’t kick you out of your room. *I’ll* take the couch. It was my idea to be here in the first place. It’s bad enough you having to deal with all your relatives without me stealing your bed too.”

Todd shook his head. “No, no, it’s no trouble. Mom would kill me if a guest was stuck on the couch, especially a Welton boy. The couch is decent. It’s just one night.”

Neil still wasn’t satisfied. It wasn’t fair. Todd shouldn’t have to give up his own room just because Neil was here. An idea began to form. He hesitated, then asked:

“Well… what if we both shared your bed? We’re roomies as it is. Not much different from the dorm. And the bed’s big enough for two.”

Todd stared, wide-eyed. Neil felt his stomach twist as he waited, anxious.

“*Neil*… I mean… only if you wouldn’t mind it…?” Todd finally managed.

Relief washed through Neil, and he grinned.

“’Course I don’t mind, Toddy boy. I know you don’t snore.”

They both laughed, the tension breaking. A beat of quiet settled between them, comfortable this time.

“Come on,” Neil said, nudging Todd’s shoulder. “Let’s go help your mom before she badmouths you again. Not on my watch!”

That earned him a real grin from Todd, and together they made their way downstairs.

Showtime.

Chapter End Notes

We’re sticking with this party for a bit so bear with me!

Chapter 9: Chapter 9.

Chapter Summary

> A Jeffrey centric chapter. Only one POV this time but we'll get Todd and Neil's in the next one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jeffrey.

As Jeffrey walks into his family home, he's greeted, as expected, by the chorus of relatives and family friends shouting, "*Happy Birthday, Jeffrey*!"

Not a surprise, of course. They always throw him a party. Still, he mildly cringes at the spectacle.

Can he not fade into the background just once? Does it always have to be about him?

Regardless, he grins, hugging his parents and working his way through the line of family members.

When he reaches Todd, he's surprised to see he isn't alone. Standing beside him is the Perry kid, the one who seems so fond of his brother. Dressed neatly, smiling easily. Todd looks lighter in his presence, though he still shrinks back a little as Jeffrey approaches.

"Hey, Toddy! Gonna introduce your pal?"

He keeps his tone casual. Too much fuss and Todd will fold in on himself.

"Oh… uh, yeah. Jeffrey, this is my Welton roommate. Neil Perry."

Neil steps forward, all politeness and practiced charm, and extends his hand.

"Great to meet you, Jeffrey. Happy Birthday."

Hm. A polite boy. Clearly well-trained, probably by strict parents, in

these sorts of social niceties. Jeff cant help but relate.

Jeffrey shakes his hand, smiling a little to himself. He's glad Todd has someone here. It swells something warm in his chest, gratitude maybe…

"Great to meet you too, Neil. Hope you boys enjoy the party."

Before either boy can reply, Jeff's girlfriend of five years, Addison, swoops in. Looping her arms around his broad shoulders and kissing him on his cheek. He melts instantly and turns to pull her fully into his arms.

"Hello, darling," he says softly, kissing her properly this time, smiling into it. Addison always makes this whole affair tolerable. His anchor.

Glancing back at Todd, he catches the quick, strange exchange: Todd and Neil glance at one another, then both look down at the floor, awkward.

Odd. Maybe PDA just makes them uncomfortable. Though Jeffrey suspects that isn't it. Not really.

He remembers the way they'd looked at each other at Welton, the quiet intensity of it. He can only imagine what it must feel like, not being able to show that openly.

Before he can dwell on the thought for too long, someone calls him away.

Duty, again as always.

Family to greet, drinks to pour, parents to appease.

Duty. Always duty.

The questions come in waves, predictable as the tide.

From the aunts:

"*So when are the two of you getting married?"*

"You must start planning a family! Twenty-five is the perfect age for it!"

From the uncles, it's all business:

"*You'd do well to work at Parker & Sons, boy. Finest law firm in the*

State."

"*We expect great things from you, Jeffrey*."

Don't get him wrong. Jeffrey *does* want those things. He wants to put a ring on his Addy's finger, give her children, settle into a good home, make a career at a respected firm.

He wants all of it. He just wishes what he's already done was enough. Wishes he was given time to live in the present.

But he never is.

It's always:

What are you striving for?

What's next?

Never simply: Well done, Jeff. Rest now. Be proud.

A man can dream.

And yet, Todd's treatment from their family isn't much better. No… scratch that. It's downright awful. Not even a comparison.

But at least Todd can vanish into the wallpaper if he wants to. At least no one's trying to script his entire life out.

He wonders which is worse. Neglect or over expectation. He supposes neither are great.

Jeffrey's gaze drifts across the room. His brother is laughing, really laughing. Not the polite little chuckle he gives out of obligation, nor the muffled sort that suggests too much joy might draw the wrong kind of notice.

No, this is different. Todd is practically glowing, eyes bright, whole face alight at something Neil has said. A sight that's foreign to the Anderson household. Particularly from Todd.

Well. At least Todd has someone in his corner tonight.

His very own Addison.

Suddenly remembering something, Jeffrey excuses himself. He slips into the front hall, digs into the pocket of his coat, and pulls out the

package he tucked carefully inside. Returning to the din of the party, he makes his way toward his brother.

“Todd,” he says, holding it out, “I almost forgot. Couldn’t send this in the mail. It’s too fragile. But… here.”

Todd blinks, startled, as he takes the parcel. His eyes lift, wide with surprise. Almost anticipating a catch. Jeff supposes that’s understandable in this household.

“Happy belated birthday,” Jeffrey adds for good measure, and then quietly. “Sorry you didn’t get it then.”

Neil, still at Todd’s side, watches the exchange with bright eyes.

Todd carefully unwraps the parcel, revealing the vintage watch nestled inside. His breath catches. He looks from the gleaming face of the watch up to his older brother, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Jeff… w-what..?”

Jeff smiles, a little sheepish but proud. He’d been planning to do this for a few years. Was gonna wait till Todd turned 18, but figured now that he was at the Academy, it wouldn’t hurt to have something shiny and expensive. Turn some heads in a good way for once.

“Every Welton boy deserves a good watch. Mom and Dad got me my first proper one at your age. Figured now that you’re a big time Academy student, you deserved one too.”

Todd just stares, the weight of it in his hands almost too much.

Neil beams, as if he himself has been given the gift.

“I gotta get back out there. But take good care of that, little bro.” Jeff winks before slipping away. He’d linger if he could, but he knows his family won’t let him disappear for long.

Besides, Todd doesn’t need him. He has a backup now.

He’s gonna be fine.

Later, he spots Neil sitting alone. Todd has been pulled aside by some relatives, no doubt a grilling about his grades at Welton.

Typical.

Jeff takes the seat beside Neil. The boy looks up, acknowledging him with a polite smile.

“Enjoying yourself?” Jeff asks.

Neil chuckles lightly. “Uh, yeah. Though I’ve had to do a bit of networking for my father’s sake. So it’s not all pleasure.”

Just as Jeff suspected. Pushy parents.

“Harvard bound?” he guesses. Not at all surprised when Neil nods.

“I’m going to be a doctor. Or so my parents say.” Neil offers, surprisingly open. Jeff supposes the kid knows he’ll understand.

“Ah. The old duty-to-your-parents deal, huh?”

Neil shifts in his seat, uncomfortable. “You could say that, yeah. I only offered to be here though because… I thought Todd could use someone.”

Jeff had suspected that too. He nods, his chest warming.

“Todd’s a great kid. We weren’t really able to grow up together. Not properly. But… I’ve always cared a lot for him. It’s nice knowing someone else does too.”

He gives Neil a pointed look. Sure enough, the boy reddens.

Yep. There it is.

But he won’t push Neil on the Todd thing.

Some things just aren’t his business.

He sighs. The boy clearly means a great deal to his brother, and it’s obvious the feeling is mutual. He senses, just from this conversation alone, that Harvard isn’t really Neil’s true passion. But Jeff knows how relentless parents can be and he decides quietly, firmly, to help however he can.

“I have some contacts at Harvard, you know. I can give you their details. Might get the old man off your back a bit. Only if you want to of course.” Jeff offers.

Neil’s face brightens. “Really? That’d be swell!”

Jeff grins. “Sure. Got a pen?”

Neil slips one from his breast pocket and hands it over. Jeff pulls a small address book from his own pocket, flips through, circles some numbers, then tears out a few pages.

At Neil’s raised brow, Jeff shrugs. “Don’t need ’em anymore.”

Neil thanks him and pockets the papers.

A beat passes.

“You’re different than I expected, you know?” Neil says at last.

Jeff shrugs. “Yeah, well… Todd’s experience with me hasn’t exactly been ideal. I haven’t been the best brother to him. I failed to protect him. From them.” He nods toward his parents. “And from those boys at Balincrest.”

Neil straightens, eyes sharp. “Boys at Balincrest?”

So… he doesn’t know. Strange. Jeff would’ve thought Todd might’ve said something given how close the two seem. Though maybe breaching what was said to him by other kids would be a sore subject.

“Oh… he didn’t tell you?”

Neil shakes his head, concern written plain across his face. Jeff exhales, uneasy. It isn’t really his story to tell, but he also can’t leave Neil hanging.

“The kid was the prime target of a group of bullies at the school. Physical, verbal… you name it. He never really said why, only that it was fine. You know how he is. Never one to complain.”

Neil nods, clearly used to Todd brushing things off, minimizing his own pain.

“Regardless,” Jeff goes on, “I didn’t protect him. Yeah, I’d already moved out by then, but still… I could’ve done more. Tried to talk to him. Tried to tell him he never needs to apologize for who he is, you

know?" His voice catches; he sniffs and forces the tears back.

Neil doesn't speak, just watches him, face open and full of empathy. Jeff decides he likes Neil Perry, a lot.

"But now," Jeff says, quieter, "I see you with him. And he has his other friends too. And I just feel… grateful. Grateful he finally has people who are there for him. Who help him feel valued."

Neil drops his gaze to his lap, emotion flickering across his face. Jeff pats his shoulder gently.

"You're a great guy, Neil. I can see that." He rises just as Todd starts making his way back over.

"You look after him, okay?"

Neil nods, eyes steady, voice quiet but certain. "I promise."

Jeff moves off, rejoining Addy and Great Aunt Irma in some lighthearted chatter about bridge club. But his eyes wander back, catching a glimpse of Todd and Neil seated close, deep in conversation.

Yeah. Todd would be just fine.

Chapter End Notes

> Jeffreys characterisation is my wishful thinking that at least Todd has SOMEONE in his family who thinks he's worth something. I also like his parallels with Neil.

Chapter 10: Chapter 10.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Todd.

If Todd hadn't already known he was so far gone for his roommate, tonight would have sealed it.

Neil is electric. He comes alive in social settings, charming people left and right.

If Todd didn't have these… *feelings*, he might have been jealous of him.

But instead, all he can do is watch. Watch as Neil swoops in when a conversation with his father drags too long, or when an uncle won't stop droning on. Watch as Neil fills in awkward silences with ease. Watch as he takes Todd aside, quietly, when he senses the boy is starting to feel overwhelmed.

When an auntie approaches—Sadie, bitter, widowed, and apparently fueled by her dislike for Todd—she starts right in on him. Grilling him about not being the top student in any of his classes, as though she's been waiting all evening to point it out.

Before Todd can even attempt to mumble a defense, Neil steps in. Firm, but polite.

"Todd is actually doing great at Welton, ma'am. He's the star student in English, in fact. Mr. Keating can't get enough of him. The rest of the boys are all jealous."

Todd just about melts on the spot.

As far as family parties go, this one hasn't been so bad. Jeffrey's gift alone has been enough to soften the edges of the evening, every time Todd glances at the watch, his throat tightens.

He'd always known his brother wasn't a horrible person, deep down. But he'd never expected him to do something so… kind. For *him*. For

Todd.

For so long, he'd assumed Jeffrey barely noticed him… just like their parents.

Maybe he was wrong about that.

He watches Jeff now, an arm draped around Addison as he leans in to whisper something that makes her giggle before she kisses him tenderly.

That part stings a little. Todd doesn't think he'll ever get that. Doesn't think he'll ever be *allowed* to.

It's fine.

Neil approaches with two chicken legs in hand.

"Snagged the last two!" he announces, grinning.

Todd can't help but grin back, taking the one offered. They eat side by side in easy silence until Neil tilts his head.

"Feel like getting some fresh air?"

Todd nods without a word, leading him out into the backyard.

Neil takes it in, eyes widening. "Damn, this house just keeps going, doesn't it?" He laughs, and Todd smiles faintly.

"I used to love this garden," Todd admits. "It was the only place in the house that really felt like it was mine."

It was true. As a boy, he'd lived a hundred lives out there. Had thousands of great adventures.

Won wars, been a pirate, a cowboy, even climbed Everest. Always alone, of course. But he'd liked it that way.

Now Neil is watching him. That soft smile, that stupid dimple, those impossibly kind eyes.

God.

Why does he have to look at me like that? Todd's chest twists. *Why can't it mean what I want it to mean?*

They stroll the garden in quiet companionship, the grass whispering underfoot.

Todd feels strangely content just being here with Neil. Alone.

Of course, they've *had* moments alone before. Late nights in their dorm, running lines by the dock, chatting in the hall between classes. But those moments are always fragile, one interruption away from Charlie bursting in with a prank, Pitts and Meeks showing off their latest contraption, Nolan calling one of them to his office, the constant presence of other students nearby.

Here, though, it's different. The party is only a dull hum behind them. The garden walls shielding them from the street behind. Out here, it's truly just them.

Neil stops suddenly, tilting his chin upward. Todd follows his gaze. The moon. Full tonight, glowing silver. They stand side by side, faces washed in its light.

Todd turns back, only to catch Neil still watching him, concern apparent in his expression. It makes Todd feel suddenly uneasy.

"W-what?"

Neil blinks, sheepish, his gaze darting down then back up.

"So… I talked to Jeffrey a bit."

There's a nervous edge to his voice that makes Todd's stomach drop. Neil never hesitates.

"Oh yeah?" Todd asks, wary.

Neil pauses, clearly weighing something. Todd hates the anticipation.

"*Neil*?"

"Sorry… I just wasn't sure if it was ok to bring up. But… Jeffrey mentioned something to me. A-about Balincrest?"

Todd's eyes widen. Oh no. His pulse spikes. What exactly had Jeff said? Did Neil know about the way he used to watch the other boys?

Todd tries to play it cool, though his gaze drops to the grass, his foot nudging at the earth.

“What about it?”

Neil shifts beside him, uneasy. “He said that… well, that there were boys who used to bully you. Or harass you even. I—Todd, I knew you weren’t a huge fan of the school, but… I didn’t know it was THAT bad for you. Why the devil didn’t you tell me?”

Ah. That.

Todd swallows, hands tightening in his pockets. “I—Neil, it was… a long time ago…”

“Not so long ago, Todd. You were there earlier this year.”

“Okay, okay, yeah. It wasn’t… it wasn’t great.” He shrugs, but it comes off stiff. “But I coped. You know me. I can just… get on with it.”

Neil shakes his head sharply, his voice tightening. “No, Todd… you shouldn’t have had to. I can’t believe anyone would ever—” He cuts himself off, jaw clenching, clearly getting heated. “Todd, you’d tell me if anyone at Welton was giving you crap, wouldn’t you? I couldn’t bear it, knowing people were hurting you.”

Todd glances up then, startled by the raw intensity in his friend’s face. “N-Neil… no. It’s fine at Welton. Great even. Thanks to you. And the other poets. And do you think anyone would *dare* cross me while in the vicinity of Charlie?”

That draws a laugh out of Neil, sudden and real, the tension easing. Todd grins too. They both know it’s true.

Charlie Dalton would beat the hell out of anyone foolish enough to try either of them.

“Still,” Neil says after a pause, his voice steady but insistent. “You have to promise me you’ll tell me if anything like that happens to you again, okay?”

Todd wrinkles his nose, then sticks out a pinkie. “I swear it.”

Neil beams, linking his pinkie with Todd’s.

The touch is small, fleeting, but Todd feels a jolt run through him, like electricity under his skin. He shudders, and swears Neil does too. But it’s cold out.

That must be it. Definitely that.

A sudden burst of cheers filters through from inside, breaking the spell. Todd sighs.

“It’s probably time for the cake. We should get back in there.”

Neil looks just as reluctant to leave their little corner of quiet, but he nods. “Yeah, okay. C’mon.”

They start toward the house when Neil suddenly flashes a wicked grin… and *bolts*.

“NEIL?? Where are you going?” Todd calls after him.

“I’m racing you to get the biggest slice of cake!” Neil shouts over his shoulder.

Todd can’t help it, he bolts after him, their laughter echoing across the Andersons’ garden.

It’s another adventure in this garden. Only this time, Todd thinks, he’s not alone.

Neil.

Neil watches as the Andersons’ final guests hug the family goodbye. Todd gets nothing more than a perfunctory pat on the shoulder.

It’s infuriating but at least the night is nearly over.

Mr. Anderson announces, far too loudly, that he and Jeffrey will be heading to the local cigar club for some “father–son bonding.” Several of the remaining male relatives eagerly agree to join.

Todd and Neil can’t, of course. They’re too young. But Neil suspects Todd is actually relieved to be left out for once.

The boys stay behind to help Mrs. Anderson and Addison tidy up. The former scolds Todd for having crumbs on his suit jacket, and scolds,

can't he take more pride in his appearance??!

Do they never give him a rest? *Jesus*.

Addison, at least, seems pleasant enough. A little shy herself, clearly smitten with Jeffrey. She's pretty, real pretty. With short brown curls, big brown doe eyes and a pink dress that hugs her figure tastefully.

Neil knows this is the sort of person he's supposed to be interested in. The type his father expects him to marry… after he becomes a doctor, of course.

But then his eyes drift to Todd, who's brushing at his suit jacket with a faintly exasperated scowl.

He's so cute Neil can hardly stand it.

He knows the type of person *he* wishes he were allowed to want.

Later still, Mrs. Anderson excuses herself for the night, and Addison heads upstairs to Jeffrey's room, offering the boys a polite goodnight as she goes.

At last, Todd and Neil are left alone. They sink into the couch, exhaling in tandem, the weight of the evening finally lifting.

Neil turns to him with a grin. "You did it!"

Todd lets out a laugh, then groans dramatically, sprawling back against the cushions, every inch of him loosening now that the crowd is gone. Neil follows suit, mirroring his posture.

For a while, silence hums between them. Companionable, easy. Then Todd shifts, glancing sideways.

"Neil… thank you. This—" he gestures vaguely, searching for words, "—it's meant a lot. Having you here, I mean. I can't believe you'd… just… thank you."

Neil's heart warms at the earnestness in his voice. He doesn't know how to put into words how much he's enjoyed this night himself. Sure, the party was dull, full of polite chatter and expectations. But being able to stand beside Todd, to glimpse the Anderson world, to see his childhood room, to meet Jeffrey…it felt important. As though he's been given a secret view into the Todd beyond Welton.

It stings, yes, to see how easily Todd is overlooked in his own family.

But it also feels like a privilege to be here, to be trusted enough to see it.

Neil reaches over, pats his shoulder gently. “Hey, come on. I wanted to be here. No need to thank me. Thank you for humoring all my dumb Harvard networking. That must’ve been super boring to listen to.”

Todd shrugs.

“I get it. Your father didn’t exactly leave you much choice.” He hesitates, then adds, “I *hate* him. You know.”

Neil shoots him a look, surprised. Todd isn’t usually one for such strong words.

Todd seems to catch himself, shuffling slightly, embarrassed by the intensity of his own admission.

“I mean… the way he treats you. Like you’re his puppet. I don’t like it. I don’t like how he makes you feel. That’s all.” He offers it as an explanation, almost defensive, almost apologetic.

Neil smiles softly at him, feeling the quiet sincerity in Todd’s words. There’s a warmth there, a tenderness, and even in the small act of speaking up, Todd shows a depth of care that makes Neil’s chest tighten just a little.

“I hate the way they treat you too, you know.” Neil gestures toward the picture of the Andersons on the mantle. “They don’t know what they’re missing out on. You’re one of the best people I know.”

It’s earnest, maybe a little too earnest, but Todd’s ferocity toward his father seems to have emboldened Neil a little.

Todd looks at him, a mix of amusement and something Neil can’t quite name flickering in his expression. They laugh softly, the sound easy between them.

“I *did* like Jeffrey though. You were right,” Neil continues, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Todd nods, shrugging lightly. “Yeah, most people like Jeff. He’s super charismatic and—”

“It’s more because of how much he seems to care for you, Todd. You

may not see it, but it's there. He cares."

Todd's gaze lingers on Neil for a moment, the weight of that thought settling between them, unspoken but understood.

"Well… we should probably get to bed. Neil, it's fine if you don't want to share with me… really. I mean, the couch is comfy and… Dad and Jeff shouldn't be too loud when they come in and—"

"Todd!" Neil cuts him off, a grin tugging at his face. "It's okay. I want to. Now come on. Or do I have to race you again?"

Todd hesitates, conflicted for just a beat, then lights up. With a wicked glance back at Neil, *he* bolts, laughter spilling from him.

"Oh, you little—" Neil yells, springing up after him, protesting loudly. "It's not fair! I had no warning! Ref! Ref! That was a foul!"

The two of them tear down the hallway, hearts pounding and laughter echoing, until they reach Todd's room, nearly breathless and almost hysterical from the chase.

Neil thinks he hasn't been so happy in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

> We will get to the … "oh no one bed?? Whatever will we do" of it all very soon but next chapter we may move away from the party for a sec.

Chapter 11: Chapter 11.

Chapter Summary

Tom being the worst... then some fluff.

Tom Perry.

Saturday evening. A dreary, joyless weekend.

Tom Perry stood at his office window, gaze fixed on the grey drizzle streaking the glass. His thoughts, however, were elsewhere. On his boy.

More and more time was being spent with that Anderson child. Far too much, in Tom's estimation. He wasn't blind; he could read the look that crossed Neil's face whenever his wife asked after the boy. A fleeting softness, almost embarrassment.

"Todd… yeah, he's nice…"

"He's real shy, but everyone really likes him."

"He actually spoke today in class… it was, uh, nice to see."

The way Neil said it made Tom uneasy.

Friendship was natural, even commendable. A boy of Neil's promise ought to be surrounded by companions. Networking, camaraderie, leadership; these things built the foundation of success. But the *quality* of those companions was another matter entirely.

The Dalton's boy, now- that one was barely tolerable. Arrogant, irreverent, too casual with elders. The Dalton fortune was vast, though, and the Perry family's social standing was tethered in no small part to that connection. Besides, the lad was rarely disrespectful in Tom's presence; he knew where the boundaries lay.

The Andersons were another story. Tom had long known of them, seen them at church beside their eldest, Jeffrey, or across the table at bridge. He found them a touch pretentious, but he could overlook that. Jeffrey himself had graduated top of his class at Welton, polished and ambitious, a model of what Tom wanted for Neil. The family's

reputation had its uses.

But Todd? Todd was a surprise. Tom hadn't even known the boy existed until that first day at Welton. The welcome service. A pale, timid figure who shrank rather than stood tall. Nothing like his brother. Not worth noticing.

And yet Neil had noticed.

That, more than anything, disturbed Tom.

Why was his boy drawn to this meek little thing?

Neil had always shown a strange tenderness for the weak and unwanted. Tom remembered it clearly: a scrawny, flea-bitten kitten his son had once dragged home, pleading to take it to the vet. Tom had seen to the matter himself… swiftly, decisively. Like a man.

The boy had wept for weeks. *Too soft. Too sentimental.*

Too *nice.*

Neil needed steel in his spine, not sentiment. Drive, ambition. The kind of hunger that set men apart. Friends should sharpen him, not soften him.

At least the Andersons' gathering had its uses. Networking. Polishing his manners. Building connections that might one day impress in his future Harvard interview.

But all that time spent hovering around Todd… no, that he could not approve of. There was nothing to gain from the boy. Nothing to admire.

Tom's jaw tightened. He prayed he wouldn't have to stamp out this attachment himself. He'd already drowned one stray for Neil's own good.

God forbid he should have to drown another.

Todd.

Todd tried not to look as Neil tugged his sweater over his head, revealing his toned torso.

God… he was just so—

No. Don't stare. You can't stare at other boys.

He dropped his gaze quickly to his lap, where his hands twisted together. He was already in his pajamas, tucked on the wall-side of the bed, trying to breathe normally.

They were really going to share his childhood bed. The thought felt equal parts dream and nightmare.

He had never shared a bed with anyone before. Not with another boy. Certainly not with a girl. Of course, he and Neil slept in the same room at Welton, and sometimes sprawled on each other's beds while reading or practicing lines.

But this…this was different.

This felt like a test of willpower. To be this close to the boy he adored, without giving himself away. He couldn't let himself linger, couldn't let himself want too much. If Neil ever pulled back, if Neil ever looked at him with disgust…he couldn't bear it.

So Todd told himself he'd settle for this. For *any* version of closeness Neil allowed. Even if it meant keeping his heart locked tight, as long as it kept him in Neil's orbit.

Neil turned then, shrugging into his nightshirt, the buttons left undone. His chest still visible. God. The soft, easy masculinity of him.

Neil wasn't just handsome…he was beautiful. Otherworldly, almost.

Todd bit the inside of his cheek. He had to stop this. Why did it feel so much worse now that it was just the two of them, the attic quiet and still, no other Welton boys in the next room?

His chest ached with the thought: *If I were a girl, would Neil notice me that way? The way I want him to?*

But even then, maybe he wouldn't. Neil would probably want someone braver. Someone with charm, with guts.

And Todd…well, Todd had none of that.

Neil met his eye, smiling faintly as he finished buttoning his shirt.

Then he crossed the room and perched on the edge of the bed.

“You okay?” he asked gently.

Todd nodded, afraid his voice might betray him. It seemed to be enough, though, because Neil slipped under the covers and stretched out beside him.

The bed was plenty big, but Todd felt the closeness like a current humming in the air. Neil shut his eyes for a second, sighing in contentment.

“Man, it is nice knowing I don’t have to get up early for church with the parents tomorrow,” he said, his voice loosening with relief. “I haven’t had a Sunday lie-in since… well, never!”

Todd felt a swell of fondness so strong it almost hurt. He smiled softly.

“My parents never even wanted me to go with them to church. Well, when they even went. They thought I was too… scruffy.”

Neil snorted, rolling onto his side to look at him. “In what universe is Todd Anderson, who showers twice a day, *scruffy*?”

Todd laughed a little, his face warming. “Well, I wasn’t always like that. As a kid I used to play outside all the time. Got mud all over my clothes. Even if I scrubbed it up, they insisted I still looked filthy. I reckon it was just an excuse not to be seen with me. So they could show Jeff off more.”

Neil’s smile faded. His eyes softened, filling with a sadness Todd almost couldn’t bear to see.

“Oh, Todd.”

The words came out like a sigh, and they sent goosebumps racing up Todd’s spine.

Hearing his name said like that—gentle, aching, almost reverent—was something else entirely.

It wasn’t fair that it couldn’t mean what he wanted.

“It-it’s fine… I liked being alone. It gave me time to read and get ahead in school and …” Todd trailed off, the excuse landing hollow even in his own ears.

Neil didn’t call him out right away. He just watched him, those kind eyes holding a depth that seemed endless, like the night sky itself had settled inside them. The sadness there made Todd’s chest tighten and a faint shiver run down his arms.

“Neil. I promise. It’s fine.”

Neil shifted closer, almost without thinking, and reached out. His fingers brushed lightly across Todd’s temple as he tucked a stray lock of hair away. The touch was feather-light, careful, yet it set Todd’s skin alight.

“You don’t always have to be fine, Todd,” Neil murmured, his voice low, almost coaxing. “It’s okay that it sucks. It’s okay to say that.”

Todd swallowed hard, breath catching at the closeness. “Neil… you…” He faltered, unable to hold his gaze for a second. “I could say the same for you. I’ve heard you cry, you know.”

Neil’s eyes widened, a flash of embarrassment coloring his cheeks. “Oh… you have?”

Todd nodded quickly, rushing to explain. “I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop… close quarters and all. But I know the pressure you feel. I know your father is unkind. I just… I just hate that it hurts you so.”

Neil exhaled, softer now, some of the tension draining from his shoulders. He gave a small, rueful smile.

“I know. But look at us…look at how we’re trying. Seizing the day. The play… your poetry. We’re breaking the mold, Todd. Just like Keating’s taught us!”

“I… I’m really proud of you,” Todd said quietly, his voice catching a little. “For going for Puck… and getting it. You’re gonna be so good next month. I just know it.”

A whisper in reply, soft enough that Todd almost doubted he heard it: “Thanks, Todd.”

The air between them felt charged, fragile. Todd’s heart thudded against his ribs, each beat like a dare. He could kiss him. Right here

and now. If Neil were a girl, he wouldn't even hesitate. The thought made him dizzy with longing and despair in equal measure.

Neil's hand moved again, tracing the line of Todd's hairline with such ease it was as though he'd done it a hundred times. His thumb lingered for a moment, then he smiled suddenly, almost amused.

"Hey—you have a curl here. I've never seen that before."

Todd's hand twitched, instinctively reaching up to smooth it back. "U-uh yeah… I tend to tuck it so it looks neater at Welton…"

"I like it," Neil interrupted, voice warm. "It's adorable."

Todd's stomach flipped so violently it was almost painful. Jesus. He didn't think he'd survive the night if Neil kept this up.

This couldn't be what it seemed like. Neil would never…

Would he?

"It uh… it's getting late. We should…" Todd's voice trailed off, half-plea, half-defense.

Neil only smiled, that gentle smile that always undid him, his dimple cutting into his cheek. "Yeah… 'course." He leaned over to switch off the lamp, plunging the room into a softer darkness.

The glow from the streetlamp outside painted him in silver, casting his features in quiet relief: high cheekbones, the sharp line of his jaw, that nose that somehow managed to be both distinguished and utterly boyish. Todd stared helplessly, memorizing him, terrified he might blink and lose it.

And then, Neil's gaze caught his, steady and sure. For a moment, Todd thought his lungs might forget how to work.

Several breaths later, when Todd had almost convinced himself he'd imagined it, he felt the faintest touch: a pinkie hooking gently around his own.

"Goodnight, Todd."

Todd swallowed hard, throat burning. “Goodnight, Neil.”

As Neil’s pinkie lingered, the warmth spreading through him was unbearable, exquisite.

I’m fucked, Todd thought. Completely, hopelessly fucked.

Chapter 12: Chapter 12.

Chapter Notes

> I couldn't be away from Charlie much longer, I was starting to miss the boy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie.

Charlie slouches in the back row of Math class, bored out of his mind. Not exactly a first. Who in their right mind actually enjoys Math anyway?

In front of him, Todd and Neil are bent over their desks, slipping notes back and forth as if they're plotting the downfall of Welton itself. Not unusual. The Dead Poets practically live off notes.

Right on cue, a folded scrap of paper lands on his desk, Knox's neat handwriting scrawled across it:

"You gotta help me think of what to say to Chris, Nuwanda. Cameron's no help. Thinks I should just give up. – Knox."

Charlie smirks, glances up to catch Knox's anxious expression, and shoots him a thumbs up. Easy. If there's one thing he knows, it's how to talk to girls. He's got the charm, the grin, the whole rebel thing going. Not to mention, he's well aware he isn't exactly hard on the eyes, if he may say so himself. Knox exhales in relief and mouths his thanks.

Charlie flicks his gaze back to the pair in front of him. Todd is unfolding Neil's latest note, and almost instantly, his ears go pink. The corners of his mouth twitch like he's trying to hold back a grin.

Curious, Charlie leans forward just enough to catch a glimpse of the scrawl:

"…so good at… write so beautifully… so very talented."

He nearly snorts out loud. Wow. Subtlety, thy name is not Neil Perry.

He studies his best friend's face. Neil is watching Todd with this wide-eyed, utterly smitten look that Charlie can only describe as *dreamy*.

He leans back, scanning the classroom. Surely someone else must see this? The air between those two is practically buzzing. But no.

Cameron's too busy scribbling *actual* notes for class, classic Mr. Know-It-All. Meeks and Pitts are passing their own scraps back and forth, probably sketching blueprints for a robot or some other piece of nerdy shit Meeks likes to think up. Charlie smirks a little. It's nerd crap, sure, but they're *his* nerds.

Still, the affection between Todd and Neil was no secret to Charlie.

At least not to *him*.

But ever since the Andersons' party, something's different, the air has shifted a little. They seem even more tangled up in one another than they were before.

Could something have happened?

Did they finally quit pussyfooting around that connection they've both been dancing circles around?

Charlie frowns, leaning back in his chair and studying them with narrowed eyes. Hard to say for certain. But Todd's the one who catches his attention most — he's writing more than usual, handing note after note to Neil, who lights up like a kid unwrapping candy every single time.

Todd Anderson. Emboldened. Now *that's* something.

Maybe it's partly because Neil now knows Charlie's clocked it ... that he's not gonna mock him, not gonna spill it to anyone. Charlie's cocky, sure, but not about this. Never about this.

Not exactly his business anyway. But still, he feels that familiar spark of responsibility. If anyone ever tried to hurt those two for what they have… well. They'd answer to *him*.

The following days, it only gets clearer. Charlie sees it everywhere.

Todd leaping straight into Neil's arms after a soccer win, and Neil catching him like it's the most natural thing in the world. Neil edging closer in the cave, settling just short of lying against Todd's shoulder,

like gravity's pulling him that way. The two of them reading lines together, inching closer and closer until they're practically *gazing* into each other's eyes like some Shakespearean lovers. Rather meta if you ask Charlie.

Something *must* have happened at that party… but what? Did they kiss? Did they finally confess?

Charlie doubts it. He knows Neil too well. Shame sits heavy on him, like a second skin stitched on by his father. Neil's already hiding the play, already buckling under secrets. Charlie can't picture him shouldering another, not one this dangerous. Mr. Perry is strict about everything, it's true... but a hint of queerness in his only son.... Charlie can only imagine the consequences of that.

And Todd? Sweet, quiet Todd? The kid barely... no never... raises his hand in class, let alone his voice to confess something like *that.* He wouldn't. Not unless Neil spelled it out for him first. And Charlie's pretty sure Neil hasn't.

He drums his pencil against the desk, frustrated. He doesn't want to meddle, *really*... he doesn't. But *God*, he wants Neil to have this. To be happy, to be *real.* To stand on a desk and shout about love, to seize it like they're always saying.

Carpe diem, baby.

But even Charlie Dalton knows the truth: society would never allow it. Not here. Not now. They'd have to keep it buried, keep it hidden, and that feels like a crime worse than anything Welton could dream up. It makes his chest ache. It's not fair. Not to Neil, not to Todd. Not to anyone brave enough to love in a world that wants to crush it.

Maybe, though, Charlie thinks, *maybe* there's a way to help without really meddling.

A nudge.

A spark.

Nothing that would send poor Anderson diving off a ledge in panic, God knows the kid startles easy, and nothing that would spill too much of Neil's heart before he's ready.

But maybe… just maybe… if Todd knew. If he had even the *hint* that what he feels isn't one-sided, then things could shift. Then maybe they

could have something. *Anything.*

Even in secret, they deserve that much. To know they're not alone. To have their little slice of freedom, however hidden.

Charlie leans back in his chair, a grin tugging at his mouth. Yeah. Maybe he *will* have a quiet word with Anderson. Not meddling exactly. More like… opening a door. It's the least he can do for his boy.

For both of them.

Todd.

Todd walks back to the dorm a little glumly. Neil's at rehearsal today. He always aches for him when he's away.

It's *pathetic*.

Neil had been particularly excited this time, they were getting their costumes fitted for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He'd begged Todd to come along, full puppy-dog eyes on display. Fucking adorable. Practically irresistible. But Todd had trig work due first thing in the morning, and he knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate on working in the corner while Neil so beautifully transformed into Puck.

Since the party… since the finger linking… Todd's chest feels like it's expanded to triple its size. He hasn't been able to conceal how hopeless he is for the other boy as well as he has in the past.

He keeps trying but.... Neil is allowing more and more touch. Nothing too intimate... not that Neil would but... more. Little brushes on his shoulder, hugging after they score in soccer. Nothing anyone else seems to notice.

But God does he feel like he could die from the constant ache in his chest.

He's known, of course. From day one. How much he likes Neil. *Too* much. He's never denied the fact to himself. The thing is… now he's past the point of no return.

He knows what it means.

He's in love. And it's *ruining* his life.

He's so tangled in his lovesick internal spiral that he practically jumps out of his skin when he walks into the dorm to find none other than Charlie Dalton perched on his bed, leafing through Todd's favorite anthology of poetry as though he owns the place.

"Charlie? What- Neil's not here today-remember, he's in—"

"Cool it, Anderson. I know. He never shuts up about Thursday night rehearsals. I'm here to see you, scamp." The nickname escaping his lips like it's the most natural thing to him.

Todd freezes. *Charlie is here to see him?* He frowns deeply, confused beyond all confusion.

He knows Charlie doesn't *dislike* him, maybe he even has a fondness for Todd, in his way, but he's never sought him out alone. Never outside of the group.

"What… w-why? Why are you here?"

Charlie clutches his chest dramatically at that, as though Todd has just shot him. "Toddy, you wound me. How can anyone make the great Nuwanda feel so unwanted, so unloved… so heartlessly tossed aside? Can a man not visit his fellow Dead Poet?"

Despite himself, Todd laughs, shaking his head.

"Of course you can Charlie... I was just... surprised."

"And honored I hope!" Charlie adds with a wink. The two chuckle a little. Then there's a pause.

Charlie sits up a little straighter then, the teasing melting into something more deliberate. His voice softens. "I wanted to talk to you about something actually. Do you wanna come sit?" He gestures to the spot beside him.

A wave of anxiety rolls through Todd. If Charlie Dalton is being *this* earnest, surely something must be wrong. Could he be upset? Has Neil

been spending more time with Todd lately than with Charlie?

He'd never want to come between them. Not for the world. He knows how much Neil loves Charlie, his best friend, the one who understands him more than anyone. The words of defense tumble from him before he can stop himself, rushed and jittery.

"Charlie, I— I'm sorry if I've hogged Neil. I— you know how he is… he just wants to help me get out there more, y'know, he's just n-nice like that and… and I think the poetry stuff is why he asks me to read lines— not you— and I—"

Charlie throws his hands up as though in surrender, grinning crookedly, but there's a flicker of surprise in his eyes, a pause that shows he's a little overwhelmed by Todd's stuttering and nervous energy. He leans back against the bedframe and looks at Todd, sympathy as well as mischief written across his face.

"Woah, Anderson…don't have an aneurysm on me. I'm not here to confront you about anything. You'd see my fists before my face if I was pissed. Trust me, kid. You're safe."

Todd exhales slowly, tension coiled in his shoulders loosening a little, though he can still feel it knotting in his chest. He shifts to sit closer, careful but wanting proximity, aware of Charlie's presence in a new, more grounding way.

"Charlie, what—" He starts, voice low, tentative.

But Charlie cuts him off, leaning forward slightly, eyes warm and earnest. "Neil is my best friend in the whole world. Don't you dare tell him this, champ, but I love him. Would ruin my rep to tell him that directly, so shut it. Though I know he knows that." A soft smile tugs at the corner of his mouth, in spite of himself.

Todd blinks, brow still furrowed, watching Charlie closely. His words hang in the air, and Todd can't help but wonder: where is he going with this?

"But," Charlie sighs, leaning back a little, eyes softening, "there's some things he still hides. From me, from the others… but I think he finds it easier to talk to you. About a lot of things. You two… well, I'm sure you know… your friendship is special. And you've only known him several months."

Todd feels his chest tighten, part pride, part something more

confusing, and he swallows hard.

“You’ve been there for him more than anyone has about the play. You’ve comforted him in times I didn’t know he needed that. I suppose, Todd… I wanted to thank you. Like some sappy motherfucker I know… but… I mean it, Anderson. I do.”

Todd feels a lump in his throat. Looking at Charlie, his own emotions are swelling across his face... a look of gratitude, relief, and something he can’t quite name.

“Charlie… I don’t know what to say…”

Unexpectedly, Charlie drapes an arm around him, a gesture he reserves for Neil or Knox, *never* for Todd. It feels weighty, significant, meaningful.

“You don’t have to say a thing, Todd. You’re doing enough for Neil. You’re part of our fold now. I just want you to know… I’m *glad*. That he has you. You mean a lot to him, ok? Trust me, I’m good as blood to that darling precious angel... that God of a boy.” A hint of a tease laces the words, but the sincerity is clear.

Todd swallows again, warmth flooding his chest. Somehow, in this quiet, if slightly awkward embrace, he feels… seen.

“But know… he’s strong… but not indestructible.” Charlie continues, a little wavering as he speaks, eyes flicking to Todd to gauge his reaction. “I know you know about Mr. Perry and how strict he is… but truth be told, Todd, I don’t think anyone knows the half of it. Except me… and perhaps Keating… that guy is a perceptive shit, you know?”

Todd laughs softly, sniffing a little, a lump in his throat he can’t quite hide. “Yeah, yeah, tell me about it.”

He knows Mr. Perry is terrible. A cruel, disgusting man. From the little he does know… from the small scraps Neil lets slip, he knows there must be more beneath the surface. He feels the weight of it, how much pressure is on Neil’s shoulders, how much the boy sacrifices to keep everything in line. Todd wishes, fiercely, that he could be the one to shield him, to take some of that burden away. And from Charlie’s own words, he senses the same protective urge in him. Maybe the two aren’t so different after all.

“I know between the two of us… we can love him, and it’ll be enough. To know he doesn’t have to please everyone all the time. You know?”

Charlie says, voice firm, loaded with meaning, and Todd feels a quiet swell of hope.

To love Neil… Charlie doesn't know the half of it.

Though the pointed expression Todd is shot might suggest otherwise… But Todd knows he's a wind-up merchant. That must be what that look means.

It must be.

"Y-yeah, I hope so." Todd manages to stammer, his chest still tight, the words feeling small but sincere. He senses Charlie's approval in the soft nod and faint smile that follows, and for a moment, he lets himself just breathe.

Charlie ruffles Todd's hair, the motion casual yet intimate, like something he might do with a younger sibling. Todd can't resist and playfully returns the gesture, their hands tussling for a moment, tentative at first, then more freely.

Laughter bubbles up between them, bright and unrestrained, and before long they're tumbling onto the floor, surrendering to the moment, rolling and wrestling with carefree abandon, too loud for a Thursday evening but too joyful to care.

At that instant, Neil steps in, cheeks pink from the cold air outside, and freezes, eyes widening in surprise. He takes in the sight of Charlie Dalton and Todd Anderson sprawled on the floor, caught mid-laughter, and can't help but grin, folding his arms across himself, clearly enjoying the scene.

"Now… what have I walked into?"

Charlie leaps up before Neil can say another word and drags him into their pile of limbs. Neil yelps as he goes down, caught off guard, and Charlie hoots with laughter, poking and prodding the boy wherever he can reach.

"Ouch!!! Charlie, that hurt… hey, stop that tickles… Mercy!" Neil protests, half laughing, half squirming, his face lighting up despite the playful chaos.

Cushions fly, the floor creaks beneath them, and Todd feels impossibly light, like he's part of something bigger, something warm and alive that he's never experienced before. He laughs too, rolling with them,

swept up in the sheer joy of the moment, unable to stop beaming.

He watches Neil and Charlie play-fight, imagining their younger selves in a similar position at seven years old.. before the world told them how to live, what to hide, who to be. Back when the only rules were games and scraped knees, snow angels and whispered secrets. No responsibility, no fear of what was to come, no shadows of expectation.

Todd wishes he'd known them then. Known their sweet, round faces when they begged for a slumber party, when they dared each other to ding-dong ditch, when their laughter rang freely through the streets. How different Todd would have been. How much less lonely he might have felt.

At least he knows them now. At least he gets to have that. Gets to be some part of their journey, even if only in a small way, even if only for a moment.

Neil meets his eye, that beautiful beam on full display, and Todd feels like he might just burst.

He hopes, beyond hope, that he gets to keep this...for a while at least.

The look on Charlie's face when he turns to Todd, smirking and joyful, tells him that maybe… just maybe, it's not impossible.

Chapter End Notes

Why yes I am a Swiftie... why do you ask?

Chapter 13: Chapter 13.

Chapter Notes

This one is a little shorter, and only one POV. But felt this needed to stand alone. More tomorrow :)

No I'm not getting bored of rolling these out insanely fast yet.

Neil.

“Okay Neil, now turn a little to the left… No, a little more….Yes, perfect, and just stay there a second… aha perfect!”

The costumer, the mother of one of the other actors, crouches to pin the hem of the brown trousers, adjusting the waistband until it sits just right.

Neil feels giddy. The fabric is ordinary wool, but to him it might as well be spun with gold. Finally, he can transform into his beloved Puck. Fully climb into his skin.

The costume will help him fully embrace the role, help him melt into the mischievous fae and cast away all thoughts other than his countless lines.

Sure, it’s been a lot to remember, but he knows who he has to thank for that. Todd. He wouldn’t be standing here so ready, so sure, without his continued support.

A tightness stirs in his chest at the thought. The previous weekend had been nothing short of enlightening.

He’d felt frustration, rage even, at the clueless Andersons. The pair, along with their extended family, treated Todd more as a pest than a son. It was clear they didn’t *know* him. Not really. They were still under the illusion that he was somehow lesser than their eldest. They had no idea what they were missing.

The boy is nothing short of remarkable. How his parents can’t see what a skillful wordsman Todd is, how much he deeply understands of the world from his gentle observations. How beautiful he sounds when he dares to open his mouth and voice his inner world in such a way

that leaves Neil utterly speechless every time.

So seeing in person how little the Anderson's thought of their youngest had been almost painful. Worse still was how easily Todd dismissed it, insisting it was *fine*, insisting it was something he could handle.

And Jeffrey. That conversation still clawed at him. The thought of anyone believing they had the right to cause Todd pain… to lay a hand on him, to shout God knows what at him…. Neil winces even now. He'd already suspected Todd hadn't many friends in Balincrest, but to hear that someone had actively tormented him? Gone out of their way to make him miserable. Tortured the most generous, caring, thoughtful boy Neil has ever known?

It had been too much to stomach.

So, he'd let himself show Todd… just a glimpse of how he felt. Just the softest caress, barely there, his fingertips brushing along the delicate lines of Todd's face. He remembers the golden curl falling against his cheek, how badly he wanted to tuck it back, to lean down and close the impossible distance. He could've kissed him.

He almost did.

He had almost pushed too far.

Too bold.

The way Todd had looked at him in the dim glow of the attic room, wide-eyed, lips parted, that pale blue light spilling across his skin… it had nearly undone Neil.

He almost took that leap.

Instead, he's settled for that fleeting touch, the tiniest tether. Too transparent, maybe. Too much.

And yet… when their pinkies linked together, when Todd tightened just enough to show he wanted it too… Neil's chest had gone into a flurry.

It was permission. The smallest yes. Enough to keep him breathing.

If only he could have more. If only he could hold him properly, touch him the way he dreams, cherish him the way he aches to.

A wistful sigh escapes him now.

He's always known, of course.

He's known from the start that Todd mattered more to him than a friend should. He's known he had a crush, that he was smitten. That Todd meant the world to him.

But after that night alone in Todd's childhood bed, something shifted. A new certainty lodged itself in his chest.

He is in love.

It isn't frivolous. Isn't a passing phase. Isn't even simple infatuation. It's steady. True. Terrifying.

Love.

He is in love with Todd Anderson.

And he knows he cannot be.

Not here, not in this life.

Society would punish it, ridicule it, crush it underfoot.

His father alone….

Neil can't even let his mind wander there. He'd sooner face the gallows.

But still… loving Todd feels like the most innocent, most *right* thing about him. It's the only thing that feels like *his*. It fuels him, keeps him from shattering, keeps him alive in the shadow of his father's will.

So, he's been allowing himself to lean into it, just a little. Not enough to scare Todd, not enough to make him pull away. Just enough to feel the spark: a shoulder brushing his, the barest lean in the cave, the warmth of Todd's hand when he dares to hold it for a breath too long while passing notes…

And Todd has been receptive. He leaps into Neil's arms during practice without hesitation, sits closer and closer in their meetings, his shy smile softening each time Neil dares test the distance.

It almost feels like—

“Ouch!” A sharp sting jolts him from his thoughts.

The costumer pulls her hand back, eyes wide with apology. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Neil! Are you alright?”

Neil forces a quick laugh, rubbing the spot. “Yeah… yeah, I’m fine. Just caught me off guard, that’s all.”

He shakes himself a little, forcing his shoulders to relax as the costumer moves on to the hem of the trousers.

He needs to stop hoping for things that can’t be.

Puck is enough for now. More than enough. Enough of a rebellion without crossing too much of a line.

His thoughts flicker, unbidden, to Jeffrey Anderson. A kinder man than Neil had expected, yet still so polished, so sure of his path.

Neil imagines him striding through a courtroom in a pressed suit, Addison on his arm, his diplomas lined up on his wall.

A man not too unlike himself, but one who seemed almost content under the weight of family pride, who didn’t just bear the burden… he embraced it.

Neil wishes, sometimes, that he was like that.

Sometimes wishes that he wanted what was expected of him.

Harvard, medicine, the steady path his father carved in stone.

It would make life easier.

Safer.

But when he’s honest with himself, if he’s brutally honest…. he can’t pretend anymore.

He glances around the dressing room now. Costumes draped across chairs, actors laughing in the mirrors, the air alive with nervous energy. This is where he belongs. This is who he’s meant to be. The thought swells inside him with both joy and terror, because if he can’t have this… this dream… he doesn’t know what he’ll do.

Aside from Keating’s class, the Dead Poets, *Todd*, this role… he has nothing else that feels real.

His mother will never stand up for him…. to Mr. Perry; she can barely withstand his shadow herself.

Neil clenches his jaw. He just *needs* to get through the play without his father knowing.

Get through the *year*.

Then he can find his way out. He can carve his own prophecy, tear down the one written for him.

He can do it. He has to.

He just needs to wait.

Later, he shivers as he steps back into the halls of the academy, the draft snaking through the corridors biting at his neck. He hugs his coat tighter around him, more than ready to burrow under the covers and sink into a well-earned sleep.

Rehearsal had been everything… electric, exhilarating.

The show was finally finding its rhythm, each piece falling into place. The actors, the director, even the stagehands and lighting crew, it was a symphony, and he couldn't believe he got to be a part of it.

Every week he was handed a three-hour slice of heaven, before returning to the dorm with the boy who made his heart stutter.

He pushes open the door, already picturing Todd's face lit up with curiosity, brimming with questions about the fitting.

Instead, the sight that greets him stills him in the doorway. Charlie and Todd are tangled on the floor, roughhousing like brothers, laughter filling the room so easily it almost seems foreign to these walls. Todd's laughter, bright, unguarded…. Beautiful... makes Neil's chest ache with something fierce and tender. The way he's fighting back, throwing in playful kicks and shoves, refusing to let Charlie win without a fight… it makes Neil beam without restraint, his whole body lit from within.

When Charlie yanks him into the fray, Neil doesn't resist. He lets himself go down, protesting in jest as he's folded into a heap of limbs and cushions, his world narrowed to his two favorite people.

They're children again, if only for this moment… wild and free and untouched by the rules closing in on them.

Neil doesn't care. He doesn't want to.

Because here, like this, he feels at home.

Here is home.

Chapter 14: Chapter 14.

Chapter Summary

Just some academic observations of love from two of my faves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keating.

Ever since John's conversation with Charlie Dalton in his office, he's kept a closer eye on his three students.

Not out of a need to pry… never that. The boys at Welton were all individuals, entitled to their private lives, and unlike the other scholars, Keating knew it was not his business to strip that from them.

His observations were merely out of care. Out of concern.

Charlie, a boy masked in humor and bravado, loud and larger than life, yet so clearly attuned to the needs of his friends. An emotional soul beneath the swagger. A soldier at heart, always ready to leap into battle for his fellow knights.

The concern he had shown for Neil, and it had been obvious it was Neil he was speaking of, had moved Keating more than he expected.

The true meaning of friendship. Unrelenting support, fierce protectiveness. Truly inspirational

Keating was a scholar, yes. But first and foremost he was a lover: of the arts, of history, of friendship and of romance in every form.

He was steeped in Wilde, in Whitman, in Shakespeare. In works laced with such adoration, with different ways to love, with different people to love.

And nothing, in his humble opinion, could be more beautiful than two individuals in love. Anderson and Perry were no exception.

He had suspected, of course he had.

Todd's poetry alone spoke volumes.

Of deep eyes, darker than solar systems but radiant with hidden light.

Of hair slicked by the rain, glinting blue in the moonlight.

Of a sideways smile, a dimple treasured like a secret.

Of pale skin described as velvet, glowing, warm to the touch.

Yes. Keating had put two and two together.

It was written all over their faces anyway, in the smallest of ways.

The way Todd's hand sometimes hovered in the air, as if it wanted to reach for Neil and couldn't; the way Neil's whole body seemed to turn toward Todd whenever he laughed; the way their eyes would seek each other out in any room, across any distance. Drawn together like a magnetic force.

He noticed, too, the way Charlie, mischievous though he was, kept watch like a guard dog, sharp-eyed and restless, as though daring anyone to challenge his comrades.

In class, Charlie would sometimes catch Keating's gaze, and in that brief exchange there was always understanding. A silent pact. Keating suspected it was a comfort to the Dalton boy, knowing that perhaps for the first time, an adult actually had his friends' best interests at heart.

An adult that wasn't concerned by what should be, rather by what could be. How the world could be with a little more empathy. A little more compassion. A little more love.

Keating was no fool. He knew what the world would call it.

Knew what would happen if the wrong person noticed.

He thought of the two now. How unfair it was that they could not be their authentic selves. That a part of them would have to stay hidden.

Neil, a remarkable boy. Kindness seemed to pump through his veins, never a cruel word spoken of anyone. Diligent and academic when duty called, yet carrying within him an unseen passion… raw, uninhibited curiosity that burst to the surface the moment he stepped into Puck's skin.

He had come to Keating with his script a handful of times, asking for guidance, how to shape a tone, where to lean into a phrase, what to let linger.

Keating gave what help he could, though the truth was Neil scarcely needed it.

The young man was a natural. Born for the stage. And with time, with freedom, he would only grow greater still.

If he were allowed to, of course. If he were not confined. If he were unlimited.

And then there was Todd.

Keating sighed, thinking of the shy boy. The extraordinary being. So lacking in self-belief, so starved of ego and yet brimming with quiet brilliance.

A mind full of rare observations, of the world's cruelties and its wonders alike.

The torment and the beauty.

The cold truth and the radiant dream.

What was and what could be.

A boy full of valuable opinions, of fierce intelligence, and yet so silenced by that relentless inner critic of his. That was always telling him he was less, that he must never dare stand apart, that he must bend himself into a mould he could never fit.

But when Todd *did* find his voice, when he did let the words out into the air, the world seemed to pause.

People listened.

They leaned closer, awestruck.

And none more so than Neil.

The two of them together… now that was true magic.

True poetry.

Two hearts finding their way to one another.

So, where others might see scandal, he saw beauty. Two boys finding each other in an institution designed to crush individuality.

And wasn't that the whole point of seizing the day?

He sighs, thinking of his dearest Clara in their home in England, missing her terribly. She would be the perfect confidant in this matter, an empathetic, kind hearted woman who, like him, believed in the true meaning of love.

Not possession.

Not obligation.

Not a means to an end.

But the very meaning of life itself.

In all its forms, romantic or otherwise.

If he could, he would write to Clara, share his observations, his fears, his sense of duty toward the boys.

But Nolan always insisted on checking the contents of every letter sent out, was terrified of faculty tarnishing Welton's image, of words falling into the wrong hands.

He couldn't risk disclosing his students secrets. He would never forgive himself if it got out.

So he would wait. Clara was due to visit him for the Christmas break.

His eyes flick to the photograph on his desk. The brunette sits poised on a bench by the Thames, the curve of her coat neat against the ironwork behind her. Her smile is soft, directed not at the camera itself but at the man behind it, a gaze full of quiet adoration. The water shimmers faintly in the background, blurred in the photograph but alive in his memory… the cold London air, the sound of gulls overhead, the warmth of her laughter just before he snapped the picture.

Clara. His love. His lady. His very heart.

He knows that once his time at Welton is done, once he's fulfilled his promise to himself, to save at least some of his students from the yawning pit that awaits them in the outside world, he will return to England. For good.

But not yet. His work is far from finished.

His boys still need him.

He's aware they haven't yet breached that tentative, terrifying line that lies between them.

But when they do, and he *knows* they will, he'll be ready. Ready to meet them in it, to offer whatever they might need.

It was the least he could do.

Meeks.

Steven Meeks sat cross-legged on the floor, his biology text open in front of him, a few rough sketches spread across the page.

Gerard Pitts leaned in close, trying to copy the diagram of a bird's mating dance, while Knox Overstreet only half-listened, as he scribbled hearts around his and Chris's names in the margin of his own notebook.

"So, you see, not every species does things the same way," Meeks explained, tapping his pencil against the drawing.

"Take seahorses… the males carry the babies. Or penguins, who find a partner and stick with them for life. Some birds dance, some just sing. The males are normally the more flamboyant. The more colorful. Certainly in the bird world. Nature isn't one-size-fits-all. It adapts. It experiments."

Knox snorted. "Pfft… birds dancing. Flamboyant. Sounds like Nuwanda at the school dance."

Pitts chuckled under his breath, while Cameron sighed loudly from the corner, muttering under his breath about how none of this would help them on the Latin exam next week.

Meeks merely smiled, suppressing the urge to flip the other boy off. He was a professional after all. “Biology isn’t about what’s proper or improper, Cameron. It’s about what is. Nature doesn’t care about human rules. It just… is.”

Cameron nodded, accepting that, and bent his head back over his notes, his Latin book lying open at his side.

Meeks only shook his head a little. Human beings could be so restricted. So restrained.

Tradition at the heart of everything, as though it had always been that way. He thought of the countless societies that had come before, the Greeks, the Romans, civilizations where love and companionship had been celebrated in many forms.

Yet here, at Welton, only one way of living was drilled into them, year after year.

Tradition, ambition, family values. Yawn.

This wasn’t Keating’s way, of course. Certainly not.

Now there was a refreshing man. Full of new perspective. Through the lens of poetry, Keating shed light on what *could* be. On possibility. The endless options that were open to them. Meeks respected him greatly for that.

If only everyone else were so open-minded.

His pencil stilled in his hand as his thoughts turned, as they often did, to Neil. To Todd.

Steven Meeks was not an idiot. He’d noticed it from the very first day. The way Todd had flushed pink whenever Neil so much as looked at him, how he could barely hold eye contact without tripping over his own tongue, dissolving into a mess of syllables.

It was pretty sweet, really. Meeks had taken pity. He knew what that felt like… being struck dumb in someone’s presence.

He’d been there himself, with guys, with girls.

With anyone who happened to catch his interest.

Love, attraction… it wasn’t something Meeks cared to put in a box.

So yes, he'd recognized it in Todd. The same lost, awkward longing. And he'd felt the urge to take him in.

A fellow soul adrift.

Most people admired Neil. For his easy confidence, for how naturally he led the group, for the way he cared so fiercely for his friends. But Todd… Todd's gaze went beyond admiration. Past infatuation. Straight into adoration, into pure, undeniable love.

And Neil… well, Meeks had never seen the boy so happy. Thanks to Keating, yes. Thanks to acting, certainly. But also, undeniably, thanks to Todd Anderson.

From the moment Todd entered their lives, Neil had shifted into a version of himself Meeks hadn't seen since boyhood, eager, open, and brimming with excitement at the world around him.

Around Todd, Neil softened.

He allowed himself moments of vulnerability, dropped the armor he wore for everyone else.

To Meeks, it was a joy to witness. This was what he wished for all of his friends: pure, unguarded happiness.

He knew the cost of this kind of happiness, of what society would say about people like them. He understood why certain feelings were never acted upon. He saw how each boy tried to hide their affection for the other… careful, guarded, afraid of judgment, afraid of what their friends might think.

Meeks knew that the very fact he was aware could make them even more cautious.

He also observed how others had noticed in their own ways.

Charlie, for instance, had clearly recognized the bond between the boys. His protectiveness was obvious; Charlie Dalton was never one for subtlety.

He suspected Keating was aware too. Like Meeks, he was not blind to the meaning behind most of Todd's poetry. The subtle glances, the lingering pauses, the words that carried more than just sentiment. They likely didn't escape Keating's notice.

These two, he knew, were not likely to shed light on the connection for anyone else. They cared enough to allow the boys to explore their bond freely, without judgment, without shame. They would protect it, quietly, as it deserved.

Lucky for all of them, Cameron, who would probably be the hardest to convert to Meeks way of thinking, was so thoroughly Welton-minded that he remained sincerely oblivious.

Knox, Meeks was certain, wouldn't be judgmental. Knox was a romantic through and through, a boy in love with love itself. And would not endeavor to point hatred toward any fellow lovers.

But he was so entirely wrapped up in the idea of Chris Noel, that Meeks doubted he'd noticed anything beyond his own daydreams.

Pitts was a different story. People underestimated his best friend, but Meeks knew better. Pitts was quiet, but he was sharp, more observant than most gave him credit for. If he hadn't already pieced together Neil and Todd's connection, it was only a matter of time. And when he did, Meeks knew with certainty it wouldn't bother him. Pitts wasn't the sort to judge.

Still, it wasn't something Meeks would ever bring up aloud. Too risky, and not his secret to tell. All he could do was hope that Neil and Todd, in time, would know the kind of person he was, that there was no world in which Steven Meeks would ever condemn them for who they loved.

He would voice his support quietly, almost imperceptibly. In small ways that wouldn't draw suspicion. He'd mention, almost in passing, how even Aristotle had observed homosexual tendencies in animals, how nature itself refused to be bound by rigid human rules.

He'd bring out pictures of Roman and Ancient Greek art, pottery lined with depictions of love in its many forms, unashamed, celebrated.

These were his quiet protests. Against conformity. Against hatred. Against the narrow limitations the human race insisted on placing upon themselves.

Meeks believed, with every fiber of himself, that the world would catch up with him one day.

That reason and truth would outlast ignorance.

Until then, he would keep sending the message.

However subtly.

However carefully.

He would get it across.

Chapter End Notes

I believe in Steven Meeks supremacy. My pansexual king.

FYI I will be away from tomorrow evening so you may not hear from this fic for a bit but never underestimate how much I'm obsessed with writing this.

Chapter 15: Chapter 15.

Chapter Notes

How do you guys like miscommunication?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd.

Todd is reading when Steven Meeks gently knocks on the door of his and Neil's dorm. Neil is at Chemistry club, an extracurricular the boy despises yet endures all the same.

Meeks enters with an eager grin, clutching a stack of heavy Latin books. Behind him, Pitts leans against the wall, quiet and solid as ever.

"Hey Todd! You coming to the study group tonight? It's the Latin cram session before the quiz, and you know you've got the best handwriting!"

Todd glances up, smiling faintly. "Sure. Just a sec. I'm on the last stanza."

Meeks grins, gives a little salute, and starts away, calling back: "Don't be late, and remember your dictionary! I'm running a mock open-book at the end."

Todd laughs softly and bends back over the page, his pencil hovering as he highlights a section that pulls at him:

I am the friend of all, comrade of all who shake hands and welcome to drink and meat,

I loosen myself, pass freely, attracting the best out of people,

None of their meaner and stingier traits, but always their sweetest and most generous traits,

Persuader always of people to give him their sweetest touches.

I want to meet every man, worst man or best man, with the open hand,

Let me hold new ones by the hand every day.

Whitman again. He's becoming obsessed. This particular poem, *Friendship and Loving Touch*, has been a favorite of late.

It is the kind of poem Todd never could relate to before. A poem about friendship, about drawing people near, about being welcomed with open arms.

Until Welton. Not Welton itself, but Keating. The Poets. Until Neil… he had never thought he would find anyone who would want his companionship.

He had thought himself unlikable, dull, forgettable. But he hasn't felt that way for months now.

The Poets welcomed him, some of them going out of their way to make sure he belonged. Neil especially, of course. But Meeks too.

Always inviting him along: to study sessions, to little walks across campus, to the library in their free period. Meeks isn't the closest to him, not yet, but he notices Todd. Not in grand gestures, Todd could never withstand those, but in the small, quiet ways that matter most.

At first Todd thought it was only politeness. That all of them were humoring him for Neil's sake, taking pity on the awkward new boy.

But then came Charlie. Charlie, who sought Todd out, who thanked him, sincerely thanked him, for what he had brought into Neil's life. Charlie, who confided his fears about Mr. Perry as if Todd was someone worth trusting.

And that was when Todd realized it: he wasn't just tagging along. He wasn't an accessory to Neil, or the little brother they tolerated, or a stray they pitied.

He was one of them.

The Poets had embraced him. Had truly embraced him. Even when Neil wasn't around, they still sought him out.

Which was rare enough these days.

Thinking of Neil now brings a smile to his face. Too transparent as always… but luckily there are no witnesses.

Being in love… knowing he is in love… it is agony and bliss in equal measure. Painful in its impossibility, yet every closeness, every brush of contact, feels like lightning crackling through his veins.

He pours it all into his poetry. Every single word is about Neil. Every line, every stanza. Not explicitly, never explicitly.

It can't be.

He strips away the names, the markers, the details that could betray him. What remains are the feelings. The raw truth of them.

The weight of being watched by those eyes, of feeling their gaze trace every line of his face. The brush of Neil's silken skin against his own. The sheer force of being near him: how his body hums, how he feels both lighter than air and struck through by lightning all at once.

Beautiful. Painful. Dangerous. Necessary.

His Neil.

If only.

He stands, clearing away his books, preparing for Meeks' session, when a scrap of paper flutters to the floor.

Odd. He hadn't remembered putting that there. He picks it up and opens it, and the moment he sees the handwriting, a jolt of recognition runs through him.

Not his writing. *Neil's*.

Todd is about to tuck the note back into the volume when a single word halts him.

Darling.

He shouldn't. He *can't*. It's a violation of Neil's trust. Not his business. And yet he can't look away. He reads the full note, heart hammering.

A partially crossed-out verse, perhaps a scrapped assignment:

You glow, my darling, my cherub my angel my cherished,

I seek you where I seek no other,

I am feel I'm so

No other can light me, guide me lost in the darkness would I be my love,

hair? cheeks? eyes?

My only, My everything,

Close Near you are, yet so out of reach,

The best sweetest being I've I have come across,

My heart.

I can't

I've never

oh love

Hardly Whitman, unfinished and only half thoughts… but the words strike Todd like a bolt. Neil… has written a love poem. And it is *impossibly* romantic.

Todd feels as though a shard of shattered glass has lodged itself in his chest. He'd always known Neil would find someone, eventually. Someone beautiful to call his own. He'd simply hoped…

Had almost allowed himself to…

He chokes back tears, shaking himself, folding the verse carefully, and placing it back on the shelf.

He's being ridiculous. Of course Neil doesn't love him… he knows that.

And yet, it feels as though he's plunged from a great height, a freefall he can't stop.

Someone else will be Neil's darling, his cherished, his *everything*.

He's heavier as he joins the other Poets at study group, only brushing Knox off when he asks about what's bugging him.

He can't afford to be so downtrodden. It's selfish. Neil deserves love.

Deserves a cherished one. With everything weighing on him, with how Mr. Perry controls his every move… he deserves more than the world to be in love.

To have someone he could actually see a future with.

He thinks of who this cherished one may be. The lucky soul who gets to be loved by Neil Perry. She had no idea the treasure she had stumbled upon. No idea how special the young man is. How rare. How wonderful.

Perhaps she is a fellow actor. Maybe the leading lady. Neil had mentioned that Hermia's actress was pretty.

He feels sick, admits as much to Meeks when asked if he's all right.

He shouldn't be this selfish. He decides he'll be who Neil needs him to be: a good friend, a fellow artist.

Not a lover. But loved… in some small way.

Not enough, but not nothing either.

Painful. But he has to face it.

There's no world in which they can be together.

Neil.

"Now boys, please put your pens down and close your workbooks. The exam has commenced."

Neil exhales, relief washing over him. Latin is done for the semester.

He finishes in good time, even reads through his answers carefully, catching a few minor errors. Welton is unforgiving of mistakes, and he knows he would be marked down otherwise.

Still, even as his body relaxes, his heart flutters with unease.

Todd has been distant lately… not entirely avoiding him, but pulling back, seeking touch less, burying himself in study, shutting himself away in the dorm more often.

He still attends meetings and joins group activities, still laughs along, smiles at Neil… yet Neil can feel a tension in him, subtle but persistent, like a shadow he can't quite reach.

When he'd asked Charlie if Todd seemed off to him, if he'd done something wrong… Charlie had just smirked almost knowingly.

"You know, Neil… I'm not some puppy-eyed, blonde-haired cutie. Not sure why you're asking me, sport. There's one sure way of finding your answer, you know?"

Of course Neil *knows* that. But he's afraid.

Is Todd disgusted by him? Has he figured him out? Knows what he is?

Is he… *repulsive* to him now?

He steals a glance at Todd, sitting just behind his desk, head tilted, eyes following the tree branches scratching at the window.

Every line of him seems to glow… sunlight catching hair, skin, the curve of a shoulder. Neil's chest tightens.

He wants him. Needs him. Aches for him so sharply it feels like it will tear him in two.

Maybe Todd has figured it out, and this is his way of letting Neil down easy.

The thought sends a twist of panic through him. God, he can't bear it.

He could apologise… could beg forgiveness… But for what? For wanting him like this? For needing him more than the air he breathes?

The pinkie touch flashes in his mind, soft, fleeting, perfect and Todd *hadn't* recoiled at that. If anything, he'd leaned into it, sought contact more often, letting them drift closer together, a quiet permission that

sets Neil's heart on fire.

Every small gesture is a spark, every glance a shock. And Neil wants it all.

Why is it so different now? What has changed?

The bell interrupts his inner torment, and the boys begin filing out of the room. Charlie calls for him but he waves him off.

Thursday evening. He has to get to rehearsal and soon… but he can't leave Todd like this. Not knowing what he has done that is so terribly wrong.

He approaches Todd, still seated in the same position, as if the ringing of the church bell hasn't reached his ears yet.

"Hey!" Neil says, forcing what enthusiasm he can, though his voice trembles, betraying him.

Todd's eyes dart up, startled, yet a teasing flicker of a smile crosses his lips almost of their own volition.

Those lips… such pretty lips for a young man, the cupid's bow, the subtle pinkness of them, slightly damp from biting them.

Christ. Focus, Neil. Focus.

"Uh, so… I was wondering, because, uh…" He scolds himself inwardly.

Jeez, Neil, you blubbering idiot. Just spit it out.

"Since you've, uh… you've been so… helpful these last months with my line memorizing… You've helped me refine Puck… I have you to thank for so much… so I… did you want to come to rehearsal tonight?"

It's the first dress rehearsal tonight, the play looming just three short weeks until opening. Normally friends aren't allowed for such an important rehearsal, but Neil feels he's running out of options.

Todd, slightly flushed, searches Neil's face as if for a sign that this is a joke. When he finds none, his smile comes… shaky, hesitant, but genuine.

Neil's heart leaps at the sight.

God calm down, Perry. Chill out.

“Uh… well, I suppose… if it’s okay—” Todd starts.

“Please!” Neil cuts him off, urgency lacing his voice.

He feels pathetic. Needy. Desperate. But he can’t find it in himself to care.

He needs Todd there like he needs oxygen to breathe. He has no other option.

Watching him, Todd softens, then nods, eyes filled with quiet affection.

“Um … okay. Yeah… okay. I’ll just go get my bag.”

Relief washes over Neil, almost dizzying. Good.

He wants Todd to see him perform. To see how alive he is on that stage. But more than that, he *needs* him there.

Needs his steadiness, his presence.

Because beneath the thrill of Puck, beneath the laughter and poetry, fear gnaws at him. He knows his father will find out soon. Somehow he will discover this.

And when he does… it will not be pretty.

Todd is the only one who can anchor him, the only one who can tell him it will be alright, that he has to see this through.

The thought of losing that, losing him, is unbearable.

Neil is strong, sturdy, resilient but he could not withstand that.

He needs him. No matter the cost.

Chapter End Notes

Ok for real this time chapters will start to get a little more limited over the next week but never fear I’m seeing this through. Thanks

for the love on every chapter. You all keep me going.

Chapter 16: Chapter 16.

Chapter Summary

This one's a little long for me folks.

We go back and forth between Knox and Charlie here a bit but mainly Knox centred.

Chapter Notes

Mild content warning for a homophobic slur.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox.

Another goddamn tutoring session. Knox loves Meeks, really, he does. The guy's solid, always has his back. But *Christ*, does he have to care so much about Latin? He swears Meeks must dream in conjugations.

Knox sighs, slumping lower in his chair, half-listening as Meeks rattles on about declensions like they're poetry. Pitts, of all people, is eating it up…leaning forward, scribbling notes like the fate of mankind rests on his understanding of ante versus post.

Knox glances down at his own notebook. The page looks less like Latin prep and more like a lovesick diary.

———

Knox Overstreet.

11/17/1959.

Chris 4 Knox

❤ *Mrs. Christine Overstreet* ❤

———

Beneath the doodles, a single half-hearted attempt at the assignment:

Prepositions + accusative

ad — towards, to, for, at

anti antee ante — before

apud — at, by, near, to, towards

inta inter — among, between

iuxta — next to, near, according to

per — by, through, during

post — after

Knox taps his pencil against the margin. He isn't sure which is more hopeless, his chances at passing this exam, or his chances with Chris.

His eyes drift to Todd, who'd wandered in late, quiet as always. Oddly enough, he doesn't look very engaged either. Usually Todd's the sort to take everything seriously, the model "goodie-goodie," as Charlie would say, but right now he looks distracted, distant. His pen rests untouched on his notebook, his gaze unfocused, fixed somewhere beyond the classroom walls.

For Knox, that's strange. For Todd… maybe it means something more.

He leans over slightly and taps Todd's shoulder.

"Hey, man, you okay?"

Todd nods quickly, too quickly, and bends over his notebook. Knox glances down and catches a glimpse of the page. It's nothing but squiggles, nonsense words strung together like he's trying to trick

someone into thinking he's working.

What's eating Todd? Knox wonders.

Sure, the guy's never been chatty, half the time you've got to drag the words out of him, but he's always been polite. Attentive. Present. Right now, though, Todd looks a million miles away. Eyes distant. Shoulders heavy. Like he's carrying some private weight.

Hmm.

Knox knows that look. He knows lovesickness when he sees it. He's been drowning in it since he first saw Chris, after all.

But… *Todd*?

Where the *hell* would Todd Anderson have even *met* a girl? The guy's practically welded to Neil's side. And it's not like he's ever shown an ounce of interest in the girls Nuwanda parades around. So how cou—

"Knox," Meeks snaps suddenly. "What did I just say?"

Knox blinks. Shit. What had Meeks been saying?

"Uhhhh… something to do with…" Knox scrambles, picking the first word he remembers from the page. "Accusative?"

Meeks crosses his arms, unimpressed. "Which means what, Knox?"

Beats me, Knox thinks. Out loud, he ventures, "Uh… moving?"

Meeks exhales sharply through his nose, the way a teacher might when they're trying really hard not to give up. "Close enough. Last warning, or I'm not helping you."

Knox slumps back in his chair, pretending to focus. He knows he should at least try, but the words on the page blur the second he looks at them. His mind slips right back to Todd.

It's definitely love. He knows the signs, the dreamy stare, the distracted fidgeting, the way everything feels heavier when your heart's tangled up with someone.

But seriously, when would he have even had the chance? Todd is never alone and he's shown zero interest in any girls they've encountered outside of Welton.

Unless Todd's been sneaking around behind all their backs or—

Oh.

It lands in him like a stone dropping into water, ripples spreading fast.

Oh.

He stares at Todd again, and the truth settles over him with startling certainty.

Todd is *in love.*

With *Neil.*

Neil Perry, their brilliant leader, the glue of the group.

With Neil.

Of course Neil's handsome, Knox knows that. He's seen how girls trip over themselves around him. But Todd… Todd's gaze is different.

The more Knox thinks on it, the more memories flood in. Todd staring at Neil in the locker room when he thought no one noticed. Todd always at his side, running lines, scribbling notes, cheering him on. Todd bringing him along to his family party and *oh*—

And Neil, too. Watching Todd read aloud in class with a kind of awe. Leaning against him in the cave like it was the most natural thing in the world. Catching him in his arms during soccer, laughing like it mattered more than the game.

How could he have been so blind…

It's all there, plain as day.

Neil is in love, too. In love with sweet, shy, Todd.

How could he have missed it?

How could he have been so wrapped up in his own pathetic pining that he failed to see the joy blooming in one of his oldest friends?

This wasn't just the play. This was more. So much more.

Shit.

It's *wonderful*, in a way… knowing his treasured friends have found love, found solace in one another. But the realization also twists something sharp in Knox's chest.

He's been so wrapped up in himself, in Chris, in the melodrama of his own "impossible" romance. But this…. this is different.

His love for Chris is complicated, sure, but it's allowed. Permitted. Even if she's with someone else, he won't be condemned for loving her. He won't be beaten down for wanting her.

Neil and Todd don't have that safety. Their love is the kind that could ruin them. The kind that must be hidden in shadows, smothered in silence.

God, he's been so ignorant.

He feels tears prick at the corners of his eyes. It's cruel, so cruel, that the two of them should feel such shame for something so beautiful. To think they've had to carry this with no one to confide in. Neil especially usually had Charlie to talk to about any—

And then it hits him like a lightning bolt.

Holy shit.

That was what Charlie had meant those weeks ago, when he asked what if a friend was in love with a leper. Knox had brushed it off as one of Charlie's weird jokes, but no. Charlie *knew*. He was talking about Neil and Todd.

Charlie's known all along.

The sneaky devil. How'd he keep that secret for this long? God, he must've been so worried about Neil. And he's been dealing with this all on his own.

Knox feels like a jackass.

Maybe he should talk to Charlie. See what can be done. Between the

two of them, hell, maybe between all of them, they have to find a way. A way to protect this. A way to protect them.

They have to help.

Charlie.

Cameron is driving Charlie *insane*.

First, he'd "helpfully" moved all of Charlie's workbooks, claiming they were cluttering the place. Now Charlie couldn't make heads or tails of them.

Richard Cameron thrived on neatly ordered lists, bullet points, color-coded margins. Charlie Dalton thrived on chaos… on piles of scraps, scribbles in the margins, half-formed ideas scattered like breadcrumbs only he could follow.

It was perfectly logical. Yet his roomie had never understood the sanctity of Charlie's utter bedlam.

Second, Cameron had thrown out Charlie's Playboys. Just chucked them, like they were contraband explosives instead of glossy pages of very pretty women. His reasoning? Nolan would one day do a surprise room inspection, somehow know to unzip Charlie's mattress, and discover the stash. Both of them would get demerits.

Never in all his years at Welton had Nolan ordered such a thing without being tipped off. Cameron was just a paranoid little shit. He was the most likely candidate to fink on him, yet he had no faith that someone else wouldn't share it.

And besides, was it a goddamn *crime* to keep a few pictures of beautiful women around? He was only human. Not his fault his roommate was basically a Martian.

Third, and worst of all in Charlie's opinion, Cameron had made a comment that still had Charlie's blood boiling.

It was just yesterday. A long Tuesday, the kind where Charlie only wanted to collapse into bed and shut the world out.

Cameron, of course, was whining. This wasn't new. The guy couldn't seem to be satisfied with anything.

This time about his debate team project. He didn't like his group: Stick, Reid, and Stanley. Perfectly decent guys, non-offensive, hardworking, fairly chilled but Cameron seemed hell-bent on dragging their names through the mud.

"And fucking Stick said we should make a point about distribution of wealth… in a prep school, for Christ's sake. We're arguing pro, so God knows why the *faggot* made that suggestion."

Charlie hadn't even been listening properly, sprawled out in bed. But that word, that word, snapped him upright. Heat shot through him like a fuse. He was suddenly a live wire. How *dare* he…

"What the *fuck* did you just call Stick, Cameron?"

Cameron blinked, caught off guard. "Huh?"

"Don't use that fucking word around me. You understand?"

Cameron smirked, leaning back. "Jeez, dude, you homo for Stick or—"

That was it. Charlie didn't even think, his fist sank into Cameron's gut before the little bastard could finish the sentence. Cameron doubled over, gasping for air, while Charlie stood over him, shaking with rage.

He'd finked. Of course he had, and now was telling anyone who'd listen that Charlie belonged in a mental hospital. Instead he was in detention. Typical.

And that's how, Knox Overstreet finds Charlie Dalton sitting in detention, grinning like he'd do it all over again.

Knox.

“What’d you do now, you dick?” Knox asks, a smile tugging at his lips at the ridiculous expression on his friend’s face.

“Ah, Rich stepped outta line. He’s so dramatic.” Charlie eyes him suspiciously. “What brings you to my neck of the woods, Knoxious?”

Knox glances at the clock. Mr. Fredrik usually takes a twenty-minute smoke break during detention. He’s got maybe fifteen before he’s caught sneaking in.

The room is empty except for Charlie, sitting at the back, tearing little pieces of paper into jagged bits.

God, how does he even start this?

Dancing around it might make it sound like there was something to be ashamed of. Like he was grappling with the morality of it. But he wasn’t. He couldn’t think of love, of true love, as anything other than beautiful. Pure. Admirable. He knew, in some small way, what it meant to fight for love.

And he loved Neil. He’d been his friend since they’d had baby teeth and scraped knees, when their only worry was whether they’d remembered the soccer ball for recess. The thought of him condemned, shunned… the thought of what Mr. Nolan might do if he found out… *Oh God,* what *Mr. Perry* might do… fear coils inside him.

No time to mince words. Just say it.

“Look… I’m not sure how to put this delicately… but, Charlie. I know about Todd and Neil.” Definitely not eloquent, but fuck it … what else could he do… he needed to be straight with Charlie, so there was no doubt he knew.

Charlie’s expression barely shifts, but Knox catches a flicker of something, fear, maybe, before his friend masks it with his usual casual ease.

“What *about* Todd and Neil?” Charlie asks, voice steady, almost defiant.

Damn. He should’ve known Charlie’s fierce protectiveness of Neil would kick in here. The two were practically brothers, of course Charlie wouldn’t risk spilling anything if there was even a chance Knox might condemn Neil. He’d probably sooner throw himself under the bus to keep Neil safe. Admirable. Valiant. But Christ… did the guy

even *know* Knox? Condemnation wasn't his style.

Knox exhales sharply, trying again. "I'm not mad. I don't hate them or anything. I just… figured it out. The way Todd pines, the way Neil lights up around him. And… the insane leper analogy you gave me."

His words seem to ease something in Charlie, the tight set of his shoulders loosens, the hard line of his jaw softens. Still, his eyes stay sharp, searching Knox's face for something. Hidden disgust? A flicker of judgment? The threat of betrayal to a teacher? But there's nothing.

Charlie allows a faint, almost wry smile, but the concern lingering in his eyes doesn't fade. He's Neil's bodyguard, through and through.

Knox feels a rush of emotion. God, beneath all his bluster, all the clownish posturing, Charlie really has a heart of gold. Knox had always thought of himself as the great lover of the group, but maybe Charlie deserves that crown, for the fierce, brotherly devotion he carries for Neil.

So Knox presses on, intent on expressing his true intentions, shifting in his seat, eyes flicking to the scattered papers and torn-up pencil shavings around Charlie.

"Charlie, what can we do? How can we help them?" His voice is quieter now, hesitant, but there's urgency in it. Knox can feel the weight of it pressing in his chest, the need to protect his friends, to make sure their happiness isn't trampled.

Charlie glances up, one eyebrow slightly raised. He leans back in his chair, hands loosely clasped on the desk, and studies Knox as though still weighing the boy's earnestness.

He sighs, when seemingly deciding he can trust him. "Listen, Knoxy, it's rough. Neil knows that I know. I made it clear that I support him… But we haven't talked about it, not explicitly, but he knows. And he knows I'm cool with him. But he's still… fragile."

Knox nods, attentive, taking in every subtle twitch of Charlie's face, every flicker of expression. He's known Neil since elementary school. Strong as he seems, Neil fights invisible battles every day. Knox suspects that only he, Charlie, and… well, maybe even Todd are fully aware of it.

Charlie shifts slightly, the afternoon light catching the corners of his tousled hair. "As for Anderson… you know how he gets when all eyes

are on him. He struggles. I wouldn't want to scare him. Push him more into an introverted spiral. I'm sure the boy already torments himself for loving Neil. So… my method has been simple: just be their friend. Show them you care through actions. Nothing grand, just… steady."

He smirks, shaking his head as if the idea of being sentimental embarrasses him. "I'm not gonna lie, Knoxy… I've gotten sappy about the whole thing."

Knox can't help but smile. He watches Charlie, noticing the softening of his jaw, the quick flash of warmth in his eyes. Charlie presents himself as the rogue, the scoundrel, but those who know him best see the loyal puppy dog beneath. All playful banter aside, he's utterly devoted to the people he loves.

"It helps though," Charlie says after a pause, leaning back slightly in his chair and rubbing at the nape of his neck. "That you seem… ok with it. It helps. I was scared I was the only sane one. Along with Keating of course."

Knox shifts in his seat, the sun streaming through the blinds catching the dust motes in the room. He watches Charlie fidget with a stray pencil, a rare vulnerability peeking through his usual bravado.

"Keating knows?" Knox asks, voice barely above a whisper.

"He's definitely guessed," Charlie replies, tapping the edge of his desk, eyes distant for a moment as though imagining the Captain himself watching over the boys.

It makes sense that Keating wouldn't hold prejudice or judgment against Neil and Todd. The man was thoroughly unconventional, thoroughly anti-tradition. He was pro–free thought, pro–love, pro–seizing life. In a way, it was reassuring, that Neil and Todd had support from an adult figure, that Charlie even had someone to fall back on. Still, Knox can't shake the feeling of being a jackass.

A *faculty member* who has only known Neil less than a year has noticed the change in him before Knox, who had been his friend since childhood. It feels like he should have known. Should have seen. Should have been the one protecting him.

It's too late to dwell on it now. And selfish, in a way, to make Neil's struggle about himself. If he wants to be a good friend, Knox knows he needs to act… to take some kind of stance, offer some kind of support.

The problem is, he has no idea how.

He glances back at Charlie, searching his face. Silently pleading for the solution.

“So… do I let Neil know I… figured it out?” Knox asks at last, his fingers drumming nervously against his knee. He wants to reassure, to do something, but he’s painfully aware the timing could be wrong.

Charlie seems to ponder the thought a great deal, a rare seriousness in his expression. It would almost be funny, if the circumstances weren’t so fraught. Finally Charlie sighs, deep worry apparent, brow furrowed, his voice wavering.

“Unsure what’s wisest. He’s already under pressure from the play. Not to mention Mr. Perry’s been on his back about Harvard.”

God, does Knox know it. Neil’s already been walking a fragile line, rebelling with the play, pushing back against his father’s rigid plans, breaking from the path laid out for him since birth.

If Tom Perry ever suspected his son harbored feelings for another boy… the thought chills Knox. It’s worse, far worse, than he’d ever imagined.

He scolds himself again. How could he have ever thought his own love for Chris was the ultimate risk, when the world held such venom for men who loved men?

“I need him to know I support him, Charlie. I need him to know how much…” Knox’s voice catches, his throat thick as he fights back tears. “He has to know how wonderful I think he is. How important he is to me. He’s been there for me, always, no matter what… I have to do the same. I couldn’t live with myself otherwise.”

Charlie studies Knox, surprise flickering across his features. There’s something almost awestruck in his gaze, like he hadn’t expected this kind of fierce loyalty from him. For a second, the usual glint of mischief in Charlie’s eyes softens into respect. But even with that, his expression hardens again, protective, resolute.

“We need to be careful, Knox,” he says, voice low and steady. “Too much, too soon, could make things worse. Just being there for him during the play… that’s probably the best support you can give right now.”

Knox nods, but the words feel like a dam pressing against the flood inside him. His whole chest thrums with urgency, a restless need to do something, to show Neil and Todd they aren't alone. Sitting on that impulse feels impossible, like trying to cork a bottle already shaking with pressure.

"But I want to—" Knox starts, his voice catching in his throat. His chest tightens with the words he can't quite force out…*I want to tell Neil, I want to promise him he's safe, I want to fix this somehow.*

Charlie cuts him off, jerking his chin toward the clock at the front of the room. "Knox, listen… we don't have heaps of time to talk here, bud. Let's meet up tonight. At the cave. We can talk more there." His tone softens on the last words, as though to make clear it isn't dismissal, but reassurance.

For the first time since Knox blurted out the truth, Charlie's guard seems to drop a little. He's no longer eyeing Knox like a potential threat to Neil's safety, but as someone who might actually help carry the weight. That small shift, the trust, settles Knox, grounding him.

There's more to discuss, more to figure out, and he aches to get it all out. But for now, Charlie's promise is enough. Enough to tide him over until nightfall. He steals an eye at the clock, about a minute until Mr. Fredrik returns. Damnit. Knox stands abruptly.

"Ok. Sure. Shit yeah, I better dash." He starts toward the door, then pauses, hand lingering on the knob. "Nuwanda? 9?"

"It's a date, baby." Charlie teases, a playful wink punctuating the words. Knox can't help but grin, the tension in his chest loosening for the first time in what feels like hours. Their laughter fills the empty room, bouncing softly off the walls, a brief reprieve from the weight of everything they've been discussing.

"I don't put out so easy, Dalton. Gotta woo me first. Take me on a couple more dates," Knox fires back, mimicking Charlie's faux flirty tone. He notices the smirk that tugs at Charlie's lips, amusement and a spark of challenge in his eyes.

"I'm a classy lady, Knoxy. Gotta wait till marriage at least," Charlie retorts, leaning back slightly in his chair, pretending to be prim and proper.

Knox chuckles. The boy is ridiculous. Hard to believe how seriously he was just talking. Charlie is an enigma.

He starts to slip out the door, then pauses and glances back. Charlie is staring at the wall, deep in thought. Even with the tension eased, some unspoken nerves still cling to him.

“You gonna be okay? Alone?” Knox asks.

Charlie scoffs, shaking his head, dismissing him. “Course. Knoxy. Now piss off.”

That’s more like the Charlie Dalton he knows. Knox salutes him before closing the door behind him.

As he makes his way back to his dorm, his thoughts drift to Neil. How hopeless he must feel, how trapped in his father’s world.

Between himself, Charlie, and Keating… they’ll get him through this.

And Todd? Knox resolves to show the shy boy some kindness over the coming weeks. He doesn’t know him as well, but he’s grown to care. As a fellow piner, he feels a responsibility now.

They need to know they’re safe with him.

He will show them matter how subtly, that love shouldn’t be a point of shame. That they never needed to hide from him.

It’s the least he can do.

Chapter End Notes

This one was a little longer but this felt important not to cut too much!

Writing Knox was surprisingly joyful, he’s such a cutie. (I haven’t read the book don’t kill me.)

Chapter 17: Chapter 17.

Chapter Notes

> I've actually written about 1500 more words continuing Neil's POV here, but felt that the next bit needed to stand alone and be developed a little more. Besides I got carried away with this one as it was.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd.

"Through the forest have I gone.

But Athenian found I none,

On whose eyes I might approve

This flower's force in stirring love."

Puck drifts across the stage, mischief in every step, searching for the right Athenian to enchant.

But Todd feels as though his eyes have already been touched by the flower's magic. He can't look away.

Neil stands center stage, crowned with thorns, dark sleeves bound at the wrists, his costume echoing the twisted trunks of the forest set around him. A dusting of powder softens his features, a trace of kohl deepens the shadows of his eyes. Ordinary makeup, a standard school production style costume… and yet, on Neil, it transforms.

He doesn't just wear the role. He inhabits it.

He *is* Puck.

Todd thinks he's never seen anything so breathtaking. Neil looks as though he were born of the play itself, a creature of fairies and mischief, meant to enchant mortals and pull them helpless into his orbit.

Not that Todd needed the help. He was already caught in it. Doesn't think that spell will ever break.

Neil has been incredible so far. Every line, every movement. Todd sits tucked far from the directors' table, allowed in on the condition he keeps quiet, doesn't laugh, doesn't distract. As if he *could*. As if he had it in him to tear his eyes away from Neil for even a moment.

"Night and silence.—Who is here?

Weeds of Athens he doth wear:

This is he, my master said,

Despised the Athenian maid;

And here the maiden, sleeping sound."

Puck crouches low, eyes glinting with mischief, discovering the wrong target. Poor Lysander, tangled up in the play's old game of mistaken identity.

Todd has never seen A Midsummer Night's Dream performed before. He used to think Shakespeare was dull, dense words on a page, meant only to confuse bored boys in stuffy classrooms.

But Keating had changed all that.

Keating had shown him the rhythm, the wit, the spark of life in the language.

Shakespeare was a true poet, yes, but also slyly funny in a way Todd never could have imagined.

And Neil…

God, Neil makes the words burn bright.

His Puck is alive, magnetic, a trickster who commands the stage without ever seeming to try.

Todd thinks that if Neil decided to speak in iambic pentameter for the rest of his life, he'd follow every word with rapt devotion.

He's a groupie for life now, he decides. If being Shakespeare's number-one fan means he can sit in the dark and watch Neil command the stage for three uninterrupted hours, then so be it. And the best part? For once, no one can call him out for staring.

"*On the dank and dirty ground.*

Pretty soul! she durst not lie

Near this lack-love, this kill-courtesy.

Churl, upon thy eyes I throw

All the power this charm doth owe."

The charm is sprinkled across Lysander's sleeping face, the man unaware that when he wakes, he'll be hopelessly enchanted by Helena… who will only recoil, certain it must be some cruel jest.

For the briefest second, Neil's eyes flicker toward the audience, toward Todd. There are only four people watching, but it feels like the entire world hangs in that glance. Their gazes lock for a heartbeat before Neil winks, barely perceptible, and shifts back into the scene, his voice carrying like a spell.

Todd has tested him on this very speech countless times. Neil was always brilliant, even in the quiet of their room. But here, beneath the lights, on the painted forest stage, something else takes hold. He is no longer Neil Perry, Welton schoolboy in a borrowed costume. He is Puck… or Robin Goodfellow… mischief and magic wrapped in flesh.

He is *fae*.

"*When thou wakest, let love forbid*

Sleep his seat on thy eyelid:

So awake when I am gone;

For I must now to Oberon."

With a final mischievous grin, Puck slips into the wings in a flurry of movement.

“Cut!” the director calls. Her voice slices through the moment, brisk and commanding.

Neil reappears almost instantly, still flushed with adrenaline, his grin wide and boyish as she begins to give her notes, referring to a clipboard as she speaks.

“*Fantastic* as always, my dear. Just remember when you’re administering the potion, watch as you do so. Puck is focused, utterly convinced he’s obeying Oberon’s command. Project the last lines, and pause before your exit. The orchestra will hold the strings for an extra beat, so take your time. You already command the stage, you’re a natural, boy. Just make sure it’s to the fullest extent. Take *advantage* of your space.”

Neil nods, focused and alight, drinking in every word. He doesn’t bristle at the notes… he seems to glow with them, alive in the give-and-take with his director.

This is where he belongs, Todd thinks. Not at Welton, not under his father’s thumb, but *here*.

Todd glances past him, at the little clusters of actors chatting in the wings.

A handful of girls laugh together, Ginny Danburry among them, tossing her hair as she talks to Demetrius. Any of them could be Neil’s “love,” Todd supposes. The thought claws at him.

But Neil hasn’t so much as lingered with them not once in the two hours they’ve been here.

His whole being has been poured into Puck, every scrap of concentration bent toward the role.

Still, Todd feels the twist in his chest. The ugly voice in his head won’t let go: Whoever Neil’s heart belongs to, *it isn’t you.*

He swallows hard, forcing his face blank.

Just a supportive friend, Todd. That’s all you can be. That’s all you get.

It should be enough. *God*, it should be.

“Quick break for this scene now, folks. We won’t run the whole show today, but remember next week we’ll be performing a full uninterrupted test run for the elementary school, so no mistakes can slip by.” The director addresses the company, her words met with a hum of nervous excitement from the actors.

“Neil, would you mind heading to Gloria? She has a few adjustments for Puck’s makeup and—” She pauses, scanning the seats, her gaze landing squarely on Todd. “Ah, yes. You, boy. Uhh… Tad, was it?”

“Todd,” he corrects quickly, his voice catching in his throat.

“Ah, yes, Todd. Of course. You’re welcome to join us backstage. Just don’t touch the sets, or your parents will be paying for the damage. There are snacks and drinks. You’re most welcome to partake.”

Todd almost feels directed himself, but it’s kind of nice, almost like he’s part of the play himself.

He gathers his things and makes his way up from the stalls. Neil is waiting at center stage, beaming, his whole body still alive with Puck’s energy. Todd’s pulse jumps as their eyes meet.

“So,” Neil says when Todd reaches him. He’s grinning as he spins once, showing off his costume. “How do I look?”

Beautiful, Todd thinks.

Ethereal. Spellbinding. Enchanting.

But the words choke in his throat. Boys don’t say that to other boys.

“You look… real handsome, Neil.”

It’s not much better but the words tumble out, breathless.

Todd flinches internally.

Too much.

Too obvious.

But Neil’s reaction undoes him… his gorgeous smile blooms, wide and unguarded, and a faint flush creeps across his cheeks and nose bridge.

“Thanks,” Neil says softly, almost shyly. He pauses, his eyes flickering away for a beat before he looks back. “Thank you, Todd.”

They stare a beat too long. Fuck he’s—

“Neil, dear? Gloria’s station, please.” The director’s voice cuts the moment in two. Neil blinks, stumbling slightly as though waking from a dream.

“Oh… absolutely, uh sorry Nancy!” He turns back to Todd, smiling again, lighter now. “Come with? Gloria’s lovely. And I hear there’s cake. It’s our lighting guy’s birthday.”

Backstage is alive with chatter and movement, everyone seemingly eager for Neil’s attention. Compliments fly at him… on his performance, his presence, even the way he moved across the stage. Todd trails just behind, watching closely, searching for some telltale sign of the mysterious love Neil had confessed to on that slip of paper.

No one stands out.

Maybe they keep it hidden, Todd thinks, his stomach tightening.

Lizzy, the actress playing Hermia, the one Neil had once mentioned as being pretty, approaches with a bright, eager smile. Todd stiffens as her eyes light up at Neil.

She *is*… pretty. He supposes. Not that he has any authority on the matter, but she’s the kind of girl Knox and Charlie would probably fall all over themselves to impress. Blonde, high cheekbones, full lips. Picture-perfect in every way. Exactly the woman Todd imagines at Neil’s side one day.

“Neil! So brilliant. You were the best I’ve ever seen you,” she exclaims, pulling him into a quick, enthusiastic hug. Todd tries not to scowl at the close contact.

God he needs to cool it.

“Ah, thanks, Lizzy. You were fantastic too. The costume really adds to it, doesn’t it?” Neil replies, smiling warmly.

She beams, giving a playful little spin, pulling her skirts out dramatically. “What do you think, Stanley gonna swoon when he sees me like this?”

Neil laughs heartily and pats her shoulder. “Oh, Liz, he’s gonna be mesmerized.”

Todd exhales quietly. *Not* her, then.

She’s clearly taken, and Neil doesn’t look remotely heartbroken about it.

His tone with her is the same he uses with Knox, with Meeks, with Charlie, supportive, easy, brotherly.

It can’t be Lizzy.

Gloria’s station is tucked into a corner, little more than a battered school desk with powders and palettes scattered across it, and a tall mirror leaning precariously against the wall.

The woman herself is impossible to miss. Gloria is probably in her mid-seventies, dressed in a riot of patchwork fabrics, her hair set in pin curls dyed the faintest pink. Large pink cat-eye glasses balanced on her nose. Unconventional, yet somehow just how Todd had pictured the makeup artist for a teenage Shakespeare production to look.

She beams and opens her arms when Neil approaches, and he melts into her embrace as though greeting a beloved aunt.

“Oh, hello sweet boy,” she says warmly, squeezing Neil so tight, Todd wonders if Neil is winded. But Neil’s answering smile is one of pure affection.

“Hey, Glo. This is my roomie at Welton. Todd Anderson.”

Gloria turns her focus on Todd, her arms already opening widely. Startled, Todd hesitates before letting himself be enveloped. She smells of roses and Chanel No. 5, her hug both overwhelming and strangely comforting. He doesn’t think his grandma has even hugged him in this way.

“Oh, sweet *Todd*! I’ve heard wonderful things. This one—” she nods at Neil, “—thinks you’re a prodigy of the arts. He swears one day I’ll be painting faces for the actors in your works. One of the greats, he calls you.”

Heat surges up Todd’s neck, his face burning crimson. He dares a glance at Neil, only to find him flushed too, eyes darting away like

he's been caught out. Not even making an attempt to correct the woman.

"It's true!" Gloria chirps on, oblivious to the awkward tension, her bracelets jingling as she gestures. "He doesn't stop talking about you. Or his other friends. I'm intrigued to meet the lovely Charlie, the fine Knox, the gentle Meeks, the sweet Pitts, the serious Cameron." She ticks them off with delight, then clasps her hands. "But most of all the *darling* Todd. The fellow artist. You must let me read your work, dearest. I can tell you what color palette fits the words. I have a gift for it, you know dear!"

Todd opens his mouth, floundering for something polite to say, but mercifully Gloria sweeps on, turning back to Neil. She begins fussing with brushes and powders, speaking animatedly about the sharpness of his cheekbones and what sort of mischief Puck would wear on his skin.

Todd stands awkwardly to the side, his pulse still racing.

Had Neil really said all those things about him?

The thought lodges in his chest like a spark, making it hard to breathe. Neil, speaking of him with such respect, such unguarded kindness… and not for Todd's ears, not to flatter him, but in the privacy of this cluttered little corner.

The idea is almost too much. His heart lurches, and for a moment he feels both lighter and more unsteady than ever before.

Hours slip by backstage in a blur of warmth and chatter. They gather around John, the kindly old caretaker who has spent decades fixing leaky pipes and squeaky doors, now finally chasing his long-held dream of lighting design. A makeshift candle flickers atop the cake, and voices rise in off-key harmony. Todd joins in, tentative at first, then louder as the room erupts with laughter and applause.

The cake is sliced, each portion handed around on flimsy paper plates. Todd takes a forkful and nearly groans. It's moist, rich, perfect.

Neil leans close, whispering with conspiratorial pride.

"Ginny Danburry made it. She's a secret baking genius." His breath fans Todd's ear, and Todd has to look away, cheeks burning, as though even that small closeness might undo him.

Scenes resume after the break, and Todd watches Neil transform again. He glides across the stage, every movement buoyant and mischievous, as though some hidden weight has been lifted.

The director's voice rings with praise, her corrections gentle and rare. Neil absorbs it all with the intensity of someone who loves every second, his whole body alive with it.

By the time the rehearsal winds down, Todd feels it deep in his chest… a rush of exhilaration that mirrors Neil's. He has never seen him so radiant, so unshackled. The difference is night and day.

For so long Neil has been bent beneath the shadow of his father's expectations… medicine, obedience, a narrow life carved out by someone else's hand. But here, on this stage, he isn't caged. He belongs.

Todd's heart swells with pride, fierce and protective. He wants this for Neil more than he has ever wanted anything.

He *needs* Neil to see this play through. Needs Neil to act, to feel this alive every single day.

Because medicine will never give him this.

Neil.

Neil is practically buzzing as he and Todd walk back toward Welton that evening. He's back in his everyday clothes now, but he aches for the weight of the thorny crown, the brush of silk against his skin. Onstage he had felt transformed, larger than himself. No longer Neil Perry, but Puck, Robin Goodfellow.

It had been the best rehearsal yet. Bar none. The lines had rolled off his tongue like second nature, the movements had flowed, and for the first time he had felt not like an amateur fumbling in a school production, but a true *actor*. A professional. Surrounded by people who loved this as fiercely as he did.

And Todd… *God, Todd.*

Being there had made all the difference. Knowing he was in the audience, quietly watching, had lit something in Neil. Every line he delivered, every gesture, had been for him as much as for the director. He'd wanted to dazzle him, and judging by Todd's flushed face afterward, he had been.

The thought of three weeks from now, standing on that stage with his friends in the seats and Keating cheering him on… it sent a thrill through his entire body. He could already feel it: the lights, the hush before his first line, the way the world seemed to bend toward him when he stepped into character. He would only grow deeper into Puck by then. The motivation was endless.

What shone brightest, though, was Todd himself. His usual quiet distance had fallen away, and he'd spoken more in the last hour than in entire days before. He hadn't stopped telling Neil how incredible he was, how he belonged up there, how proud he was of him. And every word… every stammered, earnest word, made Neil's heart race.

Todd didn't even know what he did to him.

"God, Neil, you just… *wow*. How on earth didn't you know all these years that you had this gift? How could your father ever see this and think anything other than… unreal…"

He trailed off, meeting Neil's eye. Neil had stopped and was smiling at him. Todd just looked so… cute right now, flushed from excitement, eyes bright. Neil snaps out of his lovesick trance, realising Todd must be confused by his sudden halting.

"Sorry…" He blinks, embarrassed. "I just. Wow. It means so much, Todd. Thank you."

Neil knew how transparent he must be in this moment. He wanted to kiss the shy flush off his friend's face, to get his fingers through that golden helmet of hair and pull him flush against his chest… but they were in the street.

He couldn't. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"Thank you for coming. I just… I needed you there, you know?"

Todd's gaze fell to his feet, flustered, and Neil watched the shadows trace across his face in the moonlight.

Oh, how *beautiful* he was.

“Oh… it’s no problem, Neil. I—I mean, you know—I always liked hearing you run your lines, so… it was nice seeing it on that stage.”

Neil beamed. Watching the boy trip and stumble over his words. Todd was just so, so cute. So adorably earnest. The pure affection in Neil’s eyes was impossible to conceal and he didn’t try. What would be the point? He knew it was plain as day. Written all over his pathetic face.

Right now he didn’t care.

He wanted to linger, to stay here in the quiet streets a little longer, free from the walls of Welton, just a few more stolen moments. To just be two young men out on a stroll together…

But curfew was creeping closer, and he knew he had to be careful.

“C’mon,” Neil said, stepping closer as they resumed walking. “Let’s get back. Don’t want you to get a demerit because of me.”

They moved along in near silence, the cool night air brushing past them, shadows stretching long across the empty streets.

Todd walked just slightly ahead, shoulders tense, hands shoved into his pockets, and Neil couldn’t shake the feeling of a tight coil between them… something unspoken, lingering in the space that wasn’t quite words, not yet.

By the time they reached Welton’s gates, Neil felt it pressing harder, a quiet weight he couldn’t name. He rang the bell, and the night warden greeted them with his usual tirade, shaking his head and waving a finger.

“If you two had been two minutes later, you’d be writing apologies to Mr. Nolan for a hearing! Mark my words!”

Neil half-smiled, nodding, barely listening, eager to escape into the quiet of their room.

Once inside, the door shut behind them, and the walls of their dorm seemed to hum with a strange energy.

Neil felt it acutely then, the tension, an invisible pull between him and Todd that hadn’t been there before.

He couldn’t explain it. Not yet.

God how could he sleep now?

Chapter End Notes

EEE I loved writing this one.

(Gloria may be based on a real teacher I once had who I loved but had no tact)

Chapter 18: Chapter 18.

Chapter Notes

> Oh this is a big one guys. This continues directly from the last chapter and is just Neil's POV. I really hope you enjoy.
>
> To clarify the other events of DPS are happening in the bg, Nuwandas prank/ Nolan confronting Keating about his teaching but most of this won't come in as such, the play and following events are to come and play a large part in the story, but don't worry ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil.

In the dark of their room, past midnight, Neil lies on his back, staring at the ceiling. Sleep is out of the question.

How could he sleep after a day like this?

After the thrill of being Puck in his full fae disguise, allowing himself fly across that stage, of feeling more alive than he ever has at Welton. After being surrounded by people who love this as much as he does, who make him feel like he belongs.

And Todd…

God, having Todd there.

Watching him.

Cheering for him.

Seeing him as he wants to be seen, not the boy Mr. Perry is trying to shape, but the boy he really is. He doesn't want to let this day go. He wants to live inside it forever.

Todd … one of the rare souls who truly understands his heart's desires. Who knows Neil wasn't put on this planet to appease, to conquer, to achieve. He's here to inspire. To move. To create.

To love.

As though conjured straight from Neil's thoughts, Todd shifts in his sheets, sniffing slightly. The faint sound confirms what Neil already suspects.

Todd isn't asleep either.

Maybe he's caught in the same current of adrenaline, or maybe his thoughts are heavier, weighing him down. Neil hesitates. Should he break the silence? Risk interrupting whatever storm is turning in Todd's mind?

God, why is this so hard? Why can't he just ask? That's what *friends* do. He'd press Charlie in a heartbeat. Why not Todd?

He knows why and doesn't allow himself to dwell on it.

He rolls onto his side, facing the shadowed outline of Todd's bed. His voice comes out low, careful, as though the dark itself might shatter if he speaks too loudly.

"Todd…" he whispers. "Are you awake?"

The pause that follows stretches unbearably, long enough that Neil almost regrets it, almost convinces himself he's imagined the movement. Then—

"Yes." Todd's voice comes at last, soft and hesitant, but real.

Neil feels his face scrunch. What now? He hadn't thought this far ahead.

"Are you… alright?" he finally asks, the words cautious, almost testing the air.

Todd turns toward him. In the dim light, Neil can't make out every detail, but he sees enough, the faint glint of eyes, the nervous way Todd worries his lip, the forced smile that doesn't quite hold.

"I–yeah, of course… yeah," Todd mumbles.

Neil doesn't buy it. His voice softens, insistent. "You sure? You sound __"

"Neil, it's ok. It's fine." The words come quicker, sharper than usual, carrying an edge Neil almost never hears from him.

Hm.

Neil stills. He knows when Todd doesn't want to be pushed, but concern gnaws at him.

Todd carries so much weight inside, so many self-doubts he never dares speak aloud… so afraid of burdening everyone around him simply by existing. He's never done a thing to hurt anyone, yet he apologises for breathing in a way he deems offensive.

And Neil thinks… God, to imagine how that complex must have begun. To think of parents who treat him not as their child, their flesh and blood, but as something disposable. A nuisance.

To think of what vile things boys at Balincrest must have said to carve that fear into him. To imagine Todd expecting, always, to be the butt of every joke.

If Neil could hunt down every soul who had ever tormented the beautiful boy, he would. He'd make them see. He'd make them know just how extraordinary Todd Anderson truly is.

Neil shifts closer to the edge of his bed, as though that tiny movement might help him read Todd's expression in the dark. But Todd won't meet his eyes.

"You can tell me anything, you know?" Neil murmurs.

Silence stretches, thick and fragile, like a thread about to snap. For a moment Neil wonders if Todd has drifted off, his breath is steady, his eyes closed, but then, slowly, Todd opens them again and speaks.

"You got a nice cast. They're all… friendly," Todd's voice is low, almost too casual for the nature of this talk.

Neil frowns in the dark. The shift feels sudden, like Todd grabbed the first subject that came to mind just to steer them elsewhere. To stop Neil from prying.

A deflection, maybe.

Still, it's something. It means Todd isn't shutting him out completely. Conversation, however random, is better than silence. And it's proof Neil hasn't pushed too hard.

He hasn't broken anything.

"Uh, yeah… they're the best," he answers, keeping his tone light,

encouraging.

“You were right. Some cute girls.”

Neil’s heart stutters.

Oh.

So that’s where Todd is steering this. Girls. Of course. Did someone in the cast catch his eye?

The thought twists like a thorn in his chest. He tells himself he should’ve expected this… that it’s natural, inevitable. That as Todd’s roommate, his friend, his role is to nod, to encourage. To smile when he courts beautiful girls. To be his wingman.

But God, the idea of having to watch Todd be happy with one of his drama friends makes him ache.

Worse still is knowing he’d smile for him anyway, even as it tore him apart.

“Uh, yeah. Sure.” The words scrape out of him, thinner than he intends, and he tries to flatten the edge in his voice. He’s not entirely convinced he succeeds.

Todd nods faintly, as though building up to something, his lips twitching like he’s testing out words in his head before letting them slip.

Then he shifts, pulling himself upright onto the edge of his bed. The sudden movement feels deliberate, like a signal that they’re really about to start talking.

Neil mirrors him almost instinctively, pushing himself up so they sit across the dim space, their gazes catching and holding in the half-dark, tentative but charged.

“Which one is… yours?” Todd asks at last, his tone oddly light, almost chirpy, though his posture betrays nerves.

Neil blinks. His mind stalls. *Which one is… mine? Huh?*

“My what?” he manages, the words choking out. Even without seeing Todd’s face clearly in the dark, he knows, he knows he’s blushing.

“Your, uh… your girl?”

My girl? Neil’s thoughts tumble. Where in the world had Todd gotten that idea? Sure, Neil liked his castmates… respected them, trusted them, laughed with them.

Sure, some of the girls were among his closest friends outside of Welton.

But *more* than that?

Nothing of the sort. Nothing even remotely close.

So why did Todd sound nervous asking? Why did he seem to care about the answer at all?

Neil doesn’t dare hope. Doesn’t dare dream. But a flicker of hope rears its head.

“Todd… I don’t *have* a girl. The kids in the play are mostly freshmen and the ones that aren’t are taken. ‘Sides, we’re all just friends. I don’t like anyone in the cast that way.”

An unreadable expression flickers across Todd’s face before he retreats, shuffling back into his bed. He curls onto his side, eyes cast downward, fingers worrying at the bedsheet like he’s trying to pull an answer out of the threads.

“Oh.” It’s barely more than a sound, flat, but it lands heavy in Neil’s chest.

Neil leans forward, restless, until he’s perched right on the edge of his mattress. The distance between them feels unbearable, so he tips himself closer, straining against the space. His voice comes out low, almost fragile.

“Why’d you ask?” The words hover in the air.

Part of him doesn’t want the answer… doesn’t want to risk the truth… but silence feels worse.

They’re here, teetering at the edge of something, and pretending otherwise feels impossible right now.

Todd swallows, the sound audible even in the dark. “Uh… well… I-I thought…” His voice trails, uncertain, laced with something Neil can’t quite name… hope? Fear?

Neil’s pulse quickens. What could Todd possibly have thought? His stomach knots, a swirl of anticipation and dread tangling together. He whispers, urgent now:

“*Todd*?”

Todd’s eyes flick up, then down again, his fingers still worrying the sheet. When they finally meet Neil’s gaze, there’s a hesitation there, a tremor of nerves.

“I didn’t snoop, but… I, uh… a poem… fell out of our bookshelf and it seemed—”

Oh, *shit*.

No…

The breath rips out of Neil’s chest, leaving him hollow, dizzy.

Fuck.

Todd had *seen* it… the unfinished thing he’d tried to bury. The messy, desperate confession that had spilled out of him after Jeff’s party. After the night in Todd’s bed, when Neil had finally admitted to himself what he’d been circling for months, that he was in love.

He’d written because he couldn’t hold it inside. Because Keating always said poetry could carry what the tongue couldn’t bear to speak.

So he’d let the words tumble out… how Todd made him feel, how badly he wanted to say his name like it meant something, how impossible it all seemed.

And now Todd had found it.

Neil’s stomach twists, fear choking him. Did Todd know? Could he see what the words really meant? Surely not?

But then… Todd’s voice, quiet, fumbling. “I just assumed… it was

about some girl."

Oh.

Relief, sharp and shallow, floods Neil… he's safe. His secret isn't out.

But the relief is tainted, bittersweet, because Todd doesn't *see*.

He doesn't even consider that it could be about him.

Maybe to Todd, love could only mean girls.

And so Neil's words, the most honest he's ever put on paper, are invisible right in front of him.

Shit.

"Oh. So… you saw that?" Neil's voice comes out low, awkward, almost hollow.

He feels the words stick in his throat, useless and clumsy. Every instinct screams at him to disappear into the sheets, curl up and pretend this never happened. And yet… he'd practically forced Todd to speak, dragged the truth into the light. So maybe he has to see it through, no matter how awful it feels. Even if every heartbeat rebels against it.

Todd flinches, a flush creeping up his neck, words tripping over themselves. "Yeah… sorry, Neil, I— I promise I wasn't snooping, it just… it just fell out, and I read it, and I just assumed—"

Neil's stomach tightens. He hears the guilt in Todd's voice, sees the worry etched in the pale moonlight on his face.

God, why does Todd always leap to the worst conclusions? Immediately assumes he's hated, lowly, unwanted. How can he not see the adoration Neil feels for him, the way he makes Neil feel… like he's worthy of something greater than the path laid out for him?

How could he tell him… without revealing too much, without scaring him off… yet still testing the waters a little?

Maybe it could shine a light on whatever is happening between them.

Maybe it's worth the risk.

Fuck it.

"You assumed wrong," Neil says, firmer than he feels. His chest pounds, a mixture of relief and terror coursing through him. "It's not about any *girl*."

He emphasizes the word. Wants there to be no doubt what he means, what he's implying.

There's a pause, heavy and loaded, and Neil's mind races. He watches Todd carefully, reading the way the boy freezes, the small intake of breath, the shift in his eyes.

It's delicate.

Fragile.

Every heartbeat between them seems amplified in the quiet of the room.

Neil swallows, forcing himself to stay calm, though inside he's a whirlwind of emotion.

He wants to explain.

To say everything. But for now, this will have to do.

Just the basic truth, laid bare, and nothing more.

"*Oh*?" Todd's voice comes out tight, trembling just slightly, and he swallows hard.

His gaze drops to the floor between them, fidgeting with the bedsheet in his hands. Neil watches every movement, every tiny shift, his chest tightening with a mix of dread and anticipation.

He tries not to hope, not to let himself imagine the relief, or even the happiness, that might flicker across Todd's face. But the slight exhale Todd releases doesn't go unnoticed.

Neil feels it, a quiet, fragile sign that the boy is processing, that he's beginning to understand what's being said.

He swallows, forcing his voice steady, though his heart is pounding in his ears.

"No. It's not," Neil repeats, a little pointless. An unnecessary addition even to his own ears. But he doesn't know what else to say.

The words hang in the room like a suspended note, heavy, charged. Neil dares a glance at Todd's face, searching for any hint of recognition, of understanding, of… anything.

"Then who—" Todd starts, voice tentative, but Neil can't manage it. The words, the conversation, feel monumental, terrifying even.

Not here.

Not now.

Not within the walls of Welton on a school night, where the next day they'd sit side by side in trig, pretending nothing had shifted, the air thick with awkward tension.

"It's… it's not important." He mutters, his voice low.

He knows it's a cop out. He longs to be brave. To explicitly confirm what must be crossing Todd's mind.

He feels Todd's gaze, sharp and searching, scanning every line of his face.

Jesus.

"Oh… ok…" Todd's reply wavers, fingers worrying at the edge of the sheets.

He looks rattled, breath uneven… and yet, a small smile keeps threatening to break through, a faint flush blooming on his cheeks.

Neil feels his heart lurch.

God. They're so *close*. So close to naming this, to giving voice to what has hovered between them for weeks… for *months*.

He'd almost convinced himself it was unrequited. But the way Todd has approached him, tentative, careful, reverent, and now this expression of relief, of something like hope… it makes the truth feel undeniable.

That Todd feels something too.

Neil can't know what, not for certain.

It could be a crush, it could be infatuation… it could just be admiration but what he does know, with startling clarity, is that it isn't one-sided.

At least not anymore.

If Todd were a girl… well, Neil knows he would've kissed him by now. They'd have been going steady since September at least. He could have worn him proudly, shown him off.

Show everyone how the most perfect being on earth chose *him* in return.

But Todd isn't a girl.

God, how he wishes it were okay to be the way he is.

How he wishes he'd known any other way from the start.

No girl has ever had a hold on him. He used to figure, truth be told, that he was just too focused on his studies, too intent on pleasing his father, to bother with love. That it would come after medical school, someday. When he was ready to marry a lady Mr. Perry approved of.

Sure, his heart had always pounded around certain boys, nerves sparking in their presence.

He'd assumed it was intimidation. Or jealousy.

Until the day a blond boy walked into Welton, dropped his suitcase on the other half of his dorm room, and slowly, inexorably, burrowed his way into Neil's heart.

That's when he realized what he was. That forbidden thing. The thing people spat on, hurled slurs at, beat bloody. Were *killed* for.

The fear of it weighs heavy, suffocating. And yet, around Todd, all of that lifts. The consequences would mean nothing if he got to have Todd, for real.

Being near him feels like sinking into a hot bath at the end of a long day, like slipping into a warm embrace. Todd makes him believe it. Makes him believe he really was born for more than appeasing, conquering, achieving. That maybe he was put here for something else entirely. To inspire, to move, to create.

And God, to be loved.

Neil wants that for the rest of his life.

He wishes the world were different. He wishes his love weren't condemned. He wishes there was a world where he could ask for what he wants and would get it.

If only.

They lie in silence for what feels like an eternity, ten minutes stretching endlessly in the dark. Then Neil exhales softly, a mix of relief and longing spilling out.

"Maybe one day… I can tell you... who it was—" His voice trembles, unable to finish. He's close to tears, and he knows it shows.

"*Neil*… I… I…"

Todd falters, words catching, his voice fragile and uncertain. His hand reaches across the space between their beds, hovering as if unsure why it's been extended… but Neil already knows.

He feels it: the unspoken ache for connection, for contact, for reassurance, for *any* sign that they'll be okay.

Without thinking, without letting himself spiral into overanalysis, Neil lets his need to give Todd that comfort dissolve any lingering doubt. He stands and crosses the room.

He stops for a heartbeat, hovering over Todd's bed, anxiety catching in his chest, that is until Todd looks up. Wide eyes, glassy and searching. And in them Neil sees it.

Todd wants him near, too.

He takes Todd's hand, steady but gentle, and pulls him upright. Todd moves without resistance, gaze locked on Neil.

Neil gestures for him to move back, to make space, and Todd obeys without a word. Neil slides in beside him, their hands still clasped, fingers lacing tighter. They're both shaking.

"Neil?" Todd whispers again, soft and tentative.

"It's cold tonight," Neil replies, a feeble excuse and they both know it, but it's enough.

There's a pause, a suspended moment. Then Todd allows his body to relax, seeming to realise finally that Neil isn't having him on.

Isn't setting him up for the worlds most cruel prank.

He stares at Neil for a moment, then exhales and gently rests his head against Neil's shoulder, eyes fluttering shut. Whether it's contentment or fear, Neil can't tell. All he knows is that it feels so right.

So good.

Todd's hand tightens around his, chilled and trembling, but clasping as though letting go would mean losing Neil forever.

As if he could ever get rid of him.

As if Neil could *ever* stay away.

Todd was stuck with him. For as long as he'd have him. In any way.

Neil's heart hammers in his chest, Todd's touch sparking through every crevice of him.

It feels right.

Too right.

Effortless, natural, as though a rhythm they've somehow always known.

Maybe they have.

Maybe in a thousand different lifetimes their souls have found each other, always intertwined. Sometimes as friends, sometimes as lovers, always as something more.

The thought sends another rush of feeling through Neil's chest.

Why couldn't *this* lifetime be easier?

Why couldn't they just *be* together?

A test, perhaps. A challenge to his willpower.

Although, if so, right now they're already failing.

After a moment, Neil lets his head fall gently atop Todd's. His breath stutters, catching in the quiet, and together they stay like that, suspended in an intimacy neither dares name.

Todd curls closer still, eyes shut tight, as though opening them might break the spell. Neil strokes his thumb slowly along the back of Todd's hand, tracing silent promises into his skin.

This is okay.

You don't have to run.

I want this too.

It isn't the time. It *can't* be. They can't name what's happening between them.

There's too much already up in the air. The status of the Dead Poets Society, the play…

So for now… this is all they dare take.

For this brief, stolen moment, they pretend it's just what friends do.

That this intimacy is normal between two boys.

That Welton's walls can hide them.

They both know it isn't the truth. But the lie is enough.

For now, it feels utterly, completely right. And that is all that matters.

Chapter End Notes

Not me giggling at my own words I wrote.

I’m kinda nervous about how this came out so I hope it meets expectations. I still have a lot planned for this fic and there’s still some slow burn goodness to come.

Chapter 19: Chapter 19.

Chapter Summary

> Hope you guys enjoyed the “break” from me in the time off AO3 I managed to write quite a bit so this chapter and the next will be out pretty close together.

Chapter Notes

> Please note. I have never celebrated Thanksgiving… I am not American.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie.

Welton’s lunch hall is usually unbearable. Too neat, too polite, too rehearsed. The boys lined up like little soldiers, eating in silence or trading stiff pleasantries while Nolan hovers like a ghost in the walls.

Charlie is always the exception. The lone rebel in a sea of cadets. Only he would rack up a demerit for cracking a joke at lunch. Not even in class.

At *lunch*.

Pssh… typical.

But today is different. *November 25th, 1959*. Thanksgiving.

For once, the hall feels alive. Laughter echoing off the walls, boys calling across tables, the air filled with the kind of chaos Charlie lives for. For once, nobody can scold him for actually enjoying himself.

Most of the Welton boys stick around for the holiday. Too much hassle to travel halfway across the country for a single meal.

Neil, though, isn’t so lucky. With his parents just twenty minutes away, the Perrys always insist he attend. Which leaves Charlie down a limb.

Sure, he *could* have gone home too. His family’s place only an hour’s drive away.

His mom would've liked that. Mrs. Dalton's a great woman, and Charlie's a bit of a mama's boy … though he'd rather die than admit that out loud.

His old man, on the other hand… uh well… less great. Especially after the fiasco at assembly, when Nolan nearly skinned him alive.

He can still feel the bruises, wincing as he shifts in his seat now.

Dad had paid good money to smooth that over.

Charlie?

Still doesn't give a damn.

But that attitude doesn't make him popular in his household at the present moment. So he'd skipped the Dalton festivities.

Anyway.

No use brooding.

The rest of the Dead Poets are sat at his table, cracking jokes and stealing rolls and acting like *actual* human beings for once.

Even Todd. He could've gone home, Charlie supposes; the Andersons live about as close as the Perrys do. But judging from the way Todd sits with them now, quiet, yes, but content in the chaos.

Charlie figures the invitation from his folks never came.

Or if it did, that Todd didn't exactly feel wanted.

Still, the boy seems happy enough today, even with Neil absent.

Maybe that's thanks to Knox, who's got an arm slung around his shoulders, grinning wide as he launches into one of his long-winded stories.

This one is about the time he and Charlie stole the turkey from their elementary school's Thanksgiving dinner, only to discover later it was just a stage prop for the school play.

Not one of Charlie's most ingenious pranks, he's definitely had better moments, but Knox tells it with such gusto that Todd actually laughs. *Really* laughs.

Charlie catches the sound, a grin tugging at his own lips. Since their one-to-one talk in the cave last week, Knox has been making a point of including Todd more, and clearly it's paying off.

"He's a sensitive one, Knoxy," Charlie had said, smirking as he lobbed a pebble across the cave floor. *"That's why you don't see me giving him half the crap I'd give Meeksy. Or our Princess Cameron. Or you."*

He'd leaned back against the damp stone wall then, stretching his legs out in front of him, voice softening in a way Charlie rarely allowed.

"He thrives on being included. On people actually asking him things … about Whitman, about poems, even just how he thought the pop quiz went. He doesn't expect anyone to notice him, so when you do… he's grateful."

Knox, ever the empath, had crumpled his face at that. *"Oh, poor Todd. That's so sad. No wonder Neil's such a comfort to him."*

Charlie had nodded, thinking of his best friend, who had a way of making everyone feel seen.

Neil never excluded anyone, never spoke ill of a single boy at Welton. Not even when they deserved it (*and they quite frequently did*).

He'd pulled their little group together almost without trying, held them close with nothing more than kindness. To Charlie, it was as if Neil had adopted them all, not with the stern, loveless authority of his own father, but the way a man ought to: encouraging, motivating, generous.

And with Todd… it was all that, and more. Charlie had never seen Neil pour so much of himself into someone else. Never seen him connect so fast, or with such quiet certainty.

For that, he figured the least he owed Todd was his friendship.

Knox had returned that sentiment when Charlie told him the fact.

Just then the turkey arrived, pulling Charlie back into the present. No cranberry sauce this year, the harvest had been tainted with weed killer, and Eisenhower himself had warned Americans off of it.

Charlie had never liked the stuff anyway, so he didn't miss it.

Still, the thought of Nolan biting into a spoonful of poisoned cranberries was enough to make him grin into his plate.

If only they got *that* lucky.

Todd laughed again at something Meeks whispered to him, and Charlie grinned. At least ol' Meeksy was firmly on board the "include Todd" express. He always had been, really.

Charlie gave Meeks plenty of grief, but the truth was he loved the guy.

A walking encyclopaedia, calculator, and dictionary rolled into one, not to mention, *funny* in his own dry way.

Charlie appreciated the pushback Meeks gave him, their constant give and take.

And Pittsy, dear old Pitts, never far from Meeks' side, was like an extension of him, quieter, content to hang back, but when he chose to speak up, he could drop a corker.

He was laughing along with Todd and Meeks now, eyes crinkled, shoulders shaking.

Charlie felt a sudden swell of gratitude for the lot of them.

His ragtag band of brothers.

They weren't perfect, far from it, but they were his, and by God, he was lucky to have them.

Heck, even *Cameron* had his uses… sometimes. Charlie still wasn't over the comment the boy had made last week, but he knew how deep the brainwashing ran.

His parents were even stiffer than Neil's, and Charlie had seen firsthand the way Mr. Cameron spoke to his son, cutting him down, grinding him into submission.

Even Charlie had to feel a flicker of sympathy for that. He only wished Cameron wasn't such a tattletale, a rule-bound fink.

Still, the boy had his *moments*… glimpses of who he might've been if he weren't so desperate to be the son his family demanded, the student Welton expected.

Moments where he'd crack a joke wild enough to earn suspension, or laugh along with the group's antics instead of fretting over consequences.

This Thanksgiving, though, Cameron is sat far from Charlie. He's been avoiding him in general, which isn't easy when you're roommates, but Cameron always finds a way. Not that Charlie is surprised.

After all, he had knocked the absolute guts out of him.

But what else was he *supposed* to do?

How did Cameron think he could spout that kind of garbage in front of Charlie Dalton and expect to walk away unscathed?

Then again, Charlie supposed most guys would've laughed along.

Joined in with the slurs, the name-calling.

How could Cameron have guessed that Charlie Dalton of all people would care enough to throw a punch over *"a bunch of queers"*?

How indeed…

Fuck.

Maybe he should talk to him.

Cut the boy some slack.

Painful to consider, sure… but Charlie decides to swallow his pride.

It is *Thanksgiving*, after all.

Cameron practically flinches when Charlie flops into the seat next to him, shifting back in his chair.

It's warranted … maybe, but Charlie can't help but roll his eyes.

"Cool it, chief… I'm not gonna hitcha…. again.." Charlie tries for casual, but Cameron's sharp expression doesn't soften.

Fair enough, he supposes. He wouldn't trust a hothead like him either.

"How's your feast, gentle fellow?" Charlie plays up a ridiculous accent, hoping to lighten the tension. Cameron only scowls.

"What do *you* want, Dalton? I'm trying to enjoy my meal." He scoffs, shoving another roll onto his plate.

Charlie wills himself not to just leave him be. He'd much rather be

laughing with Knox, winding up Meeks, even messing with Todd's hair and playfighting.

But a Dead Poet is a Dead Poet.

He knows this tension will dampen the mood for the rest of the boys too… not least Neil.

He needs to make things right. Shit, he wishes he didn't have to.

Anything for Neil, right?

Taking a deep breath, counting to ten, he leans forward.

"Listen. I was out of line. I feel… uh, real bad… that I hit you."

Cameron blinks. "Wow. Real heartfelt," he deadpans. "I almost shed a tear."

Charlie wants to sock him right in the teeth. Counting to ten again, he tries a different tack.

"Listen, I was just joshing with you. You know how I am… impulsive, dumb—"

"An *imbecile*," Cameron mutters under his breath.

That almost makes Charlie smile. Sparring he can cope with. Little jests he can cope with.

"Yeah. So you shouldn't let me get you down, Richie boy!"

Cameron's mouth twitches, fighting a smile and losing. "Don't call me that."

Charlie exhales, satisfied in knowing some of the tension has eased.

He sighs. "Look, Cameron… the group needs us all to get on. We're already on tenterhooks."

"Yeah, thanks to you," Cameron points out.

Ouch.

Fair enough. Charlie clutches his chest dramatically, and Cameron rolls his eyes, but he is really smiling now, genuinely amused at the antics.

“You wound me, you really do, Richard… but I think I have it in my heart to forgive you.” Charlie holds his heart as though it’s a solemn sacrifice. Cameron laughs despite himself.

“I hate you.” But he’s shifted a little closer.

“I can accept that.” Charlie grins, and, never one to linger in sincerity, he ruffles Cameron’s perfectly gelled hair.

“Hey… I spent all morning on that… oh, I’m gonna kill you!” Cameron protests, laughing despite himself.

Knox piles on, mussing Cameron’s hair even more, and within seconds they’ve all collapsed into a heap of limbs. Todd’s laughter rings out the loudest, bright and unguarded.

For once, nobody shouts at them. No demerits, no lectures. Just noise and warmth and the rare feeling that maybe everything’s all right.

It is, after all, a day for giving … and forgiving.

…*God*, Charlie thinks, he’s turning into a sap.

If only Neil were there to see it.

Neil.

Neil *hates* Thanksgiving.

It seems pointless. A wasted Thursday spent exchanging polite niceties with relatives, especially with his parents.

Neil sits in his father’s study, a stolen breather from the bustle of the family party spilling through the house. Dinner is over, thanks dutifully given, but his parents insisted the night drag on, drinks, stiff conversation, endless small talk.

No games, no laughter.

No thanksgiving day parade.

Just business. Just *bragging*.

How he longs to be at Welton today: at the table with his friends, laughing, joking, playfighting.

Charlie making ridiculous impressions of the first Thanksgiving, Meeks recounting how wronged the natives were and refusing to give thanks for anything other than "*science and advancement.*"

More than anything else, he wishes he could be with Todd.

Now that they've breached, just marginally, the line they once pretended didn't exist, they allow more of what they've held back.

They run Neil's lines together, side by side in his bed rather than opposite. Todd leans his head on Neil's shoulder, unabashed. Neil sometimes brushes his fingers through that golden mane, and Todd will sigh, melting closer.

They steal shy, uncertain looks, blush, and yet never look away. They allow their fingers to linger longer as they pass notes, they sit closer and close in the cave, millimeters away from fully lying against one another. It would be bliss… if they were allowed to have it… to fully have it.

They don't talk about it. Barely even acknowledge it.

But it's there nonetheless.

"Neil." His father's sharp tone cuts through his thoughts, the man entering the study and shattering Neil's blissful daydream of holding Todd's hand, of brushing his cheek with his lips, things he longs for but cannot allow himself.

"Yes, sir?" Neil smiles politely, slipping into the boy his father expects him to be.

Mr. Perry frowns. "You've been awful quiet today, son. You have obligations, goddamn it. Now get back to the festivities. Your family is more important than you dilly-dallying in here. You hear me?"

Neil nods, eyes on his hands. He'd tried, polite conversation, asking questions, talking about Welton, about his grades. And still, as always, it isn't enough.

It *never* is.

“Yes, sir. Of course, Father.” He forces a smile. Mr. Perry grunts, somewhat satisfied, and together they re-enter the family room.

His mother sits alone in an armchair. Distant. Her gaze fixed on the window, brow furrowed, untouched by the polite chatter and clinking glasses around her.

Is she… upset?

She isn’t talkative by nature, shy almost, but Tom usually compensates, filling the air for them both.

A wife’s obligation, Tom often asserts, is to back her husband up: to parrot how well he provides, how generous he is, how much he has sacrificed for his family.

Mrs. Perry fulfills that role perfectly. Quiet but polite, speaking in all the right places, smiling when required. A model housewife. A model mother. And yet, Neil suspects Tom is never satisfied. Never content. Always wanting more.

Still, as he watches his mother, lost in her own thoughts, Neil wonders if she feels it too, the weight, the *pressure*.

Did *she* once have dreams?

Hopes?

Impossibilities she was never allowed to chase?

A woman born into a world where wife and mother was all she could ever be.

He steps closer, bending to kiss her cheek. She brightens at once, turning from the window with a smile just for him, her precious boy, as she calls him.

“Hello, dear. How are you doing? We got worried there that you’d run out.”

He almost wishes he had. Wished he’d run straight back to Welton, to the little room he shared with Todd. *Longed* to crawl into his arms, safe and warm.

Obligation. Always obligation.

He glanced toward his father, who was holding court with the

neighbors, voice booming as he bragged about Neil's "success," about Nolan's glowing reports.

Could the man not talk about *anything* else?

Turning back to his mother, Neil forced a polite smile. "Yeah, Mom. Sorry. I just needed a bit of air, you know?"

She nodded, contemplative.

"Yes, it does get stifling in here. So many people in such a small space." She caught his gaze, her own smile soft, knowing.

"I bet you wish you were off having fun with your schoolmates, hmm?"

Nail on the head. But it would be rude to admit it. Especially with guests so near.

"Thanksgiving is for family," was all he dared say.

Mrs. Perry nodded again, glanced at her husband, then back at Neil. "You're a good boy. We're very proud, dear."

He almost laughed.

Proud.

If only they knew.

Would they beam with pride if they knew he'd joined the Dead Poets Society?

Would they be proud if they knew that every week he flounced across the stage in a fairy costume, projecting flowery words of prose into an empty theater?

Would they be proud if they knew he had forged his father's signature just to stay in the play?

Would they still be proud if they knew how he felt about another boy?

Would they disown him?

Would they do worse?

The thought threatened to spiral, dark and consuming, so he shoved it

down.

Forced another smile. Nodded, as though her words had settled him instead of hollowing him out.

Mrs. Perry opens her mouth to speak, an unreadable expression flickering across her face, something almost like recognition, as if she has put together a piece of a puzzle she cannot name.

Then—

“Patty. You’re needed in the kitchen.” Tom’s booming voice cuts through, and just like that, the moment collapses.

Mrs. Perry rises at once, obedient but hesitant, her hand brushing the armrest as though she’d rather linger, as though she’d like to say more. To comfort. To talk.

But her words are limited. And she is needed.

Wifely duty.

For the first time, Neil thinks, perhaps naively, that he and his mother aren’t so different after all.

That they bear the same insurmountable weight, pressed down by Tom Perry’s hand.

Maybe she would understand.

Maybe one day they could speak of it.

But not today. Today, they *submit*.

Thanksgiving, after all, is about duty.

Chapter End Notes

> Fun fact when researching what day thanksgiving would’ve been (I have an exact timeline leading to the play) I found out about the poison cranberry harvest in the US that year and how no one

had the sauce that year so I had to include Charlie's take on that. https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-great-cranberry-scare

Fun fact it was also the last black and white Thanksgiving parade.

Chapter 20: Chapter 20.

Chapter Notes

> Another long one folks. This one gets a little heavy. We go into some period typical homophobia topics, not in too much detail, but it is emotive. So precede with some caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd.

For weekends without Neil, this one hasn't been the worst.

Todd had always half-believed the Dead Poets only included him because Neil wanted them to, because Neil made it clear he should be there. But Thanksgiving had proven that wasn't true. The boys had been on their best form, pulling him in, making space for him. Charlie and Knox especially.

Knox was always kind, that was simply who he was. But at dinner Todd noticed something more deliberate, Knox going out of his way to bring him into the fold.

Catching him up on inside jokes, making sure everyone heard when Todd said something funny under his breath. Passing him the last slice of turkey.

And Charlie… well, Todd had started to feel like he was properly friends with him for a while now. Like he was finally Nuwanda-certified after their talk in his dorm those weeks ago, sharing their mutual concern and care for Neil.

His connection with Neil… that was different. Special. He knew that now. But even aside from Neil, he had never known anything like the bond he'd found with the Dead Poets. He had never belonged to a group before. Never really had friends at all.

Acquaintances, yes. The kind you played with at church on Sundays, who wouldn't so much as glance at you outside of it. The polite children of his parents' friends, who'd make small talk over dinner and then vanish from his life. But never anything deeper.

Never anything that felt real.

It had only been a few months at Welton, and the place was far from perfect. The whole school seemed designed to press the boys into stiff molds, cardboard cutouts of men meant to embody “tradition, honor, discipline, excellence.”

And yet.

The Captain had cracked something open.

His insistence that they think for themselves, that they chase beauty and meaning, had made even the dullest lectures and strictest punishments feel almost bearable. Almost.

But more than that, it was the friendships that made it worth it. The sudden, dizzying realization that he mattered, really mattered, to people his own age.

To anyone.

He thinks of that night in their room, just a week ago. Thinks of what it meant. Of everything it might mean.

Todd still can’t quite believe it. The way Neil had spoken to him, so openly, so boldly. As if saying aloud the very thing Todd had spent months trying to bury. He kept telling himself Neil hadn’t meant it like that, that it couldn’t possibly have been about him. *And yet…*

Neil had reached for *him*. Held *his* hand. Curled against *him* like it was the most natural thing in the world.

They could both pretend it was nothing more than comfort, the kind of closeness friends offered when words weren’t enough. But they knew better. They had felt the weight of it, the unspoken truth humming beneath.

And since then…

Todd had let himself lean in, inch by inch, as far as it felt safe. Tentative at first… laying his head on Neil’s shoulder when they read lines together, bracing himself for rejection. But Neil hadn’t brushed him off. He’d met him there, running his fingers through Todd’s hair in a touch that was almost casual, but carried a tremor of care.

Tender.

Steadying.

The kind of comfort only Neil seemed able to give.

Todd wanted more. *God*, he craved more. But even this, these small moments, this quiet intimacy, was more than he had ever dreamed he could have.

He'd never imagined anyone would let him this close, let alone someone he loved.

And still, fear clung to him.

What if Neil was mistaken?

What if he didn't really feel the same?

Todd wasn't someone worth tender words or reverent glances.

What if one day the illusion shattered and Neil saw him for what he really was?

Worse, what if he *hated* him for it?

Accused him of twisting things, of corrupting him, of tricking him into something he didn't want?

God, he wishes they could talk about it…properly, openly, without the weight of Welton's walls pressing in on them.

He wishes he could talk to anyone about this, without the terror of being cast out, beaten, despised.

Without the dread of being sent away to be "*fixed*."

Worst of all, without the risk of it rebounding on Neil, of his father finding out.

As much as he trusted the Poets, as much as he knew they were good guys, loyal friends, Todd couldn't imagine telling them.

They'd look at him differently.

They'd call his feelings wrong, a passing phase, a delusion.

Worse, they'd think him perverted.

They'd believe he might prey on them, that he'd somehow corrupted Neil.

He couldn't bear it if his ties with the boys, with their friendship was torn before he'd even had a chance to enjoy it properly.

He could never tell his parents.

Never tell Jeffrey.

His parents would seize on it as an excuse to ship him off somewhere, to see him even less, maybe to be rid of him entirely.

Jeffrey… Todd wasn't sure what he would do. But he couldn't imagine his brother, the model citizen, model son, model student, model man, ever approving of the kind of love Todd longed for.

He didn't dare risk it.

Although… there was always Keating.

Somehow Todd felt that even if the man disapproved, even if he were disgusted by Todd's feelings, he wouldn't *turn him away*.

He'd still find some way to help, to soften the blow.

To comfort.

To encourage.

Maybe he wouldn't celebrate it, not outright. But Todd couldn't imagine him condemning it either. Not entirely.

He resolves to talk to him.

How, he isn't sure.

What words he could possibly use, he has no idea.

But he needs *something*, advice, guidance, anything to make sense of the storm inside him. And Keating… Keating is the only one who has ever given him that.

The only adult Todd has ever trusted.

Still, as he nears the Captain's office, every instinct in him screams that this is a mistake. That he's about to ruin everything.

He hesitates, heart thundering.

Carpe Diem.

He lifts his hand, knocks once.

“Come on in!” Keating’s voice calls warmly from inside.

No turning back.

Keating.

The moment Todd steps into his office on the Friday following Thanksgiving, Keating senses a conflict deeper than the boy’s usual qualms.

He still beams, though, fond of Todd in a way he rarely allows himself to admit as a teacher.

Each year brings a variety of bright-eyed, eager minds. Students passionate about life, about English, poetry, learning itself. Keating remembers them all, whether they embraced his teaching, whether they left the school as free thinkers or bound by convention. Every soul that crossed his classroom mattered.

Teaching is the joy of his life: introducing art, beauty, the very best things the world offers. He will never tire of it.

Yet students like Todd are rare.

To most, he’s unassuming. Keating has heard other teachers grumble: *too quiet, too timid, unlikely to leave a mark.*

John disagrees wholeheartedly.

True, Todd Anderson may never be one of Welton’s “greats,” but perhaps, in Keating’s eyes, he could be his greatest student yet.

“Ah, Mr. Anderson. Please, take a seat.” Keating gestures to one of the armchairs as Todd closes the door cautiously, saying nothing.

It isn't technically office hours. Today is a holiday, a day off. Keating shouldn't even be in his study. But he has fallen dangerously behind on marking and decided a quiet day alone was the best way to catch up.

Todd could never be a distraction, he reasons. Perhaps he can make an exception.

Todd sits, silent, eyes fixed on his feet. Keating moves from behind his desk and settles into the chair next to him.

"Todd?" he asks softly. "It's okay. Take your time. Just know this is a safe space. You can talk to me."

Todd's eyes brim with unspilled tears. He blinks rapidly, sniffles, still not meeting Keating's gaze.

"Mr. Keating… I don't want to bother you… I—I just… I…" He falters, words tangling in his throat. Keating doesn't push. He knows better than to force the moment. This isn't class. He simply sits, patient, allowing Todd the space to find the words on his own.

"I-I am… sir… I needed… to talk to someone. I feel like… I—" Another sniffle, a tear slipping free.

Wordlessly, Keating offers him a candy bar. Todd allows himself a small, grateful smile, takes a breath, and continues.

"Mr. Keating, I… I wasn't sure who… but… I needed to talk to someone." He pauses, drawing in another shaky breath. Keating leans in, matching him silently.

"Y-you speak of… of love a lot… in class…"

Ah.

Keating's mind begins to whirl, piecing it together.

This is the heart of it.

The heavier topic Todd needs to discuss. He can feel the boy's fear, the careful way he edges toward his confession.

"Indeed, Mr. Anderson. Love is a many-splendored thing, or so the tune goes, I'm led to believe," Keating offers lightly, hoping to ease the tension.

Todd manages only a faint smile, polite rather than amused.

Keating's eyes soften with affection. How unfair it is that such a bright, sensitive boy should be so fearful of love. So afraid of the consequences of feeling it and being felt for.

"Sir… so… you, uh… you understand… I mean to say… you've been… in love… sir?" Todd stammers, then immediately apologizes, "I-I'm so sorry, that wasn't… appropriate—"

But Keating interrupts the boy's insistence on tormenting himself. "Oh, pish posh, Mr. Anderson. It's a fair question. I'm a man who speaks of and reveres love, holds it up as the ultimate root to happiness. It's only natural you'd be curious. And yes… I am in love. At this very moment, in fact."

He smiles faintly, thinking of his dearest in London, wondering how she's faring, how their dog is, how her father is. He misses her keenly, eagerly awaiting her letter, and her upcoming Christmas visit.

He gestures to the photograph on his desk. Todd studies it, this time smiling genuinely.

"She… looks nice. Looks like… a keeper," he says a little awkwardly.

Keating chuckles, feeling a little paternal warmth toward the boy. "She is. My Clara. You'd like her, she's also a keen poet. More so than I, if you'd believe it." He gazes at the photograph with longing.

Todd nods, smile dropping slightly as he seems to mull his next words over. After a few quiet moments, Todd presses on.

"So… you, uh… know… how love can be… how you can feel so… I mean to say, sir… love can hurt." Todd doesn't meet his eyes, cheeks pink as an azalea.

"Certainly," Keating replies softly. "The very act of loving is full of risks. Risk of heartbreak, of embarrassment, and in some cases… real harm. Of persecution."

Todd's eyes flicker up to Keating's, wide and glinting, tears still threatening to fall.

"*Persecution*?" he murmurs.

"Indeed," Keating replies gently. "I'm sure you're aware of certain

rhetoric…about who some people choose to give their hearts to. Forbidden, in some ways. Yet…" He watches the realization cross Todd's face, his nervous energy intensifying, and presses on carefully.

"As far as I'm concerned, Mr. Anderson, if love is mutually consensual and no one is harmed, all love is beautiful. No one should be persecuted for whom they choose to love. But that's just my two cents."

"*Sir*…" Todd begins, voice shaky.

"You don't have to say anything you aren't ready for, Todd. Please just know this: I will not judge you. Whatever you tell me stays in this room, if that's what you need."

Todd's face crumbles, tears finally spilling freely, more openly than Keating has ever seen. He pats the boy's arm, holding back from pulling him into a proper embrace.

Keating isn't exactly a stickler for rules, but he knows the limits of his role as a faculty member.

He lets Todd cry, giving him space, then slowly reaches for his handkerchief, offering it as the boy begins to calm.

Red-eyed and flushed, Todd lifts his gaze.

"You *know*?" he ventures quietly.

Keating smiles softly, patting his arm again. "Yes, Todd. I do, and I think it's beautiful."

Todd manages a small smile as he wipes his eyes. "I don't know what to do, sir. I—I really… I… I *love* him."

It must have taken every ounce of courage to say that aloud, especially for a boy so timid. Even for the boldest of men, confessing love in front of an authority figure is no small feat. Many would scoff, dismiss him, even suggest he be "corrected."

But what Todd needed was understanding. Perspective.

"I suspected as much," Keating says gently. "Your poetry, Mr. Anderson, it paints our dear Mr. Perry so beautifully. Nothing anyone else would notice, mind you. The Welton boys aren't exactly trained analysts of the written word. But for us, for poets, words are love

made manifest."

Todd sniffles, wiping his eyes again. "I couldn't… I couldn't help it. It's pouring out of me, every crevice, sir. He's in every part of me. Oh Keating… *I'll ruin him.* I—"

Keating leans forward, his voice low and steady. "Neil will not be ruined by someone like you. Quite the opposite. You *see* him, you truly see him, for who he *is*, not for what he could achieve, not for who others demand he become. That is why he's drawn to you, Mr. Anderson. You will not be his ruin. If you let yourselves, you may very well be each other's making."

Todd ducks his head, exhaling shakily. "But I can't give him… I can't give him a normal life. We wouldn't be able to… I—I'm afraid."

He cries again, shoulders shaking, fear and pain etched across his face. Keating curses inwardly.

Damn it. Fine. Just this once.

He leans forward and gathers Todd into an embrace. The boy clings to him instantly, burying his face against Keating's shoulder, sobs wracking through him. Keating lowers his voice to a whisper, steady, certain.

"It's alright, Todd. You are not broken. You are not wrong for this. Not in the slightest."

When they finally pull apart, both of them a little misty-eyed, Todd exhales shakily and turns his gaze toward the window.

"No one will accept us," he murmurs. "We'd have to keep it secret. If we ever did…" His words trail off, heavy with hopelessness.

Keating leans back slightly, choosing his response with care. "How can you be so certain? Your friends, *Neil's* friends, you've all taken my message to heart. To think independently. To support one another."

He tilts his head. "Take Mr. Dalton, for example. Can you imagine a world in which he'd see anything Neil does as perverse, as wrong? Would he ever cast out his dearest friend?"

Todd shakes his head immediately, no hesitation.

"Exactly," Keating says gently. "Now think carefully, Todd. How has

Charlie been treating you recently? What sort of messages has he been sending you?"

Something shifts in Todd's expression then, his lips part, his eyes widening, a soft gasp slipping out. Awestruck, almost disbelieving.

He doesn't need to answer. Keating can see it in his face, the realization has landed.

Keating leans forward slightly, his tone still calm but purposeful. "Now, Todd, you don't have to do or say a thing. But I want you to remember this: many of those you love, many you already trust, will accept you. More than you might dare believe."

Todd draws in a shaky breath, swiping at his damp cheeks with the back of his hand. The worry hasn't vanished, Keating can see that, but something has lightened in him, some small burden eased.

"Mr. Keating… I… thank you," Todd says, halting and uncertain. "I didn't think—I mean, you're always so kind, but… I never imagined you'd—"

Keating reaches out, patting his arm, a smile softening his features. "Oh, son. You think so little of yourself. So little of what you bring to this world."

He shakes his head gently, eyes warm. "I hope you know, Mr. Anderson, that you've made my time at Welton all the more bearable. You, Neil, *Charlie*…" He chuckles, remembering Dalton's fierce loyalty, his half-serious bravado. "All of you remind me why I teach in the first place."

His voice lowers, growing tender. "My purpose here has always been to show you it's enough to be who you are…not who the world insists you *should* be."

Todd sniffs and nods, but then bites his lip.

"But sir… what if being who I am… being authentic… if it gets me hurt?"

Keating exhales, the weight of it sinking in. It was the sad truth. The world, shaped by prejudice, fear, and conformity, was not kind to difference. Love between men, between women, is seen as a crime, a sickness. The reality is harsh, and Keating knows it.

But he also knows this: times change. Times are changing already. The fight for justice is never easy, equality for women, for people of color, for anyone who dares to step beyond the narrow lines society draws, it's not easy.

Progress is slow, painful, people have fought tooth and nail. Yet hope has always endured, outlasting cruelty.

He turns back to Todd, speaking gently.

"You're right, Todd. It may hurt. The world doesn't yet know how to honor all kinds of love, and sometimes it punishes what it doesn't understand. But…" He leaned in, his eyes bright with quiet conviction. "That doesn't mean you are wrong. Or broken. It means the world is. And it will not always be this way. Change comes because of those who dare to live honestly, even if only in small ways. Even if only in their hearts."

Todd watches Keating as he speaks, wonder flickering across his tear-streaked face, as though he can't quite believe such acceptance.

Keating leans back slightly, his tone steady but kind. "My advice, Todd? Be careful, especially within these walls. But don't chain yourself down out of fear either. We don't know how long any of us have. Not to sound morbid, but life is fickle, and chances pass us by faster than we think."

Keating thinks solemnly of a girl he once loved, long before Clara, back in school, before the war. She was a bright, kind soul from a travelling family. They'd sneak away at night, stealing moments beneath the stars, her laughter carrying in the dark. He had never told her he loved her. Never had the chance. Her family's camp was attacked by hateful men, men who couldn't abide difference. She vanished, never to be seen again.

He loves Clara with his whole heart, she is his dearest companion and he could never regret her, but not a day goes by when he doesn't think of that girl, and what might have been if he'd spoken his truth in time.

"So… tell him. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. But when you're ready. And when you do…I believe, truly, it *will* go well for you." His voice feels thick with emotion, and the weight of his words seems to land in Todd's chest, pressing against something that had been locked away for too long.

Todd sniffles, nods, and for a few moments they sit together in quiet

understanding.

At last Todd pushes himself to his feet. “I should… I should get going. The guys want to have a meeting soon, so I should… probably…” He gestures weakly at his tear-streaked face, flushed from crying.

Keating lets out a small laugh. “Ah, well, then you and I are in similar shape.” His own eyes sting with unshed tears, but he makes light of it as he crosses to a bookshelf.

“Wait a moment.” He pulls down two slim volumes, flipping through the pages quickly. With a pencil, he circles a few poems, folding corners, making faint marks in the margins. Then he places the books into Todd’s hands with a kind of ceremony.

“Some light reading, Mr. Anderson. Each of these deals with love deemed… forbidden, or misunderstood. Love struggling against the world, against identity, against silence. I think the poet in you might find good company in these voices.”

Todd clutches the books to his chest, as though Keating had handed him something far more precious.

“Thank you… Keating, I—”

“There’s no need to thank me, son.” Keating cuts him off gently, his tone firm but full of warmth. “I appreciate you opening up to me about this. It’s a tender subject, and I know it can’t have been easy.”

Todd ducks his head, a faint blush coloring his cheeks.

“You are a brave soul, Anderson,” Keating adds, resting a hand on his shoulder for a moment. “Don’t you forget it.”

Todd swallows hard, but there’s a lightness in his expression now, a faint, almost disbelieving smile tugging at his lips, as though Keating’s words had settled somewhere deep inside him, somewhere he didn’t yet have the language for.

“And remember,” Keating adds softly. “I won’t ever repeat any of this. Not to anyone. You need not worry about this conversation leaving this room. You hear me?”

Todd nods quickly, then, before he can second-guess himself, steps forward and pulls Keating into a brief, impulsive hug.

Keating lets the embrace linger only a few seconds before gently drawing back, resting his hands firmly on Todd's shoulders, grounding him with reassurance.

"I hear you, Captain," Todd says quietly, his voice steadier now. "Thank you… for hearing *me*."

Keating gives him one last encouraging smile. Todd turns, opens the door, and slips out into the hall.

In the quiet of his office once more, Keating sinks back into his chair, letting the silence settle around him. The emotion lingers, as though Todd's presence still hums in the air. He hopes his words reached the boy, hopes they were enough to remind him he isn't alone, isn't a burden simply for existing as he is.

The world can be unrelenting, unforgiving. Yet, to Keating, its beauty still outweighs its cruelties.

Love will prevail. One day, it will be celebrated.

And until then, Keating resolves, he will never stop fighting for it.

Not for a second.

Chapter End Notes

> Keating and Todd's relationship means so much to me, so I hope I did it some justice. To me it's the emotional heart of the movie.

Chapter 21: Chapter 21.

Chapter Summary

> Little interlude before the plot moves forward. Two unassuming perspectives now.

Chapter Notes

> Content warning for this chapter: Discussions of child loss/ miscarriage.
>
> Wasn't sure if it would count as an M rating, since it doesn't go into graphic detail and is brief, but I still wanted to give a proper warning for those who may be sensitive. This is only in the second POV and is about midway, so feel free to skip if needed.
>
> Also general warning for Tom Perry being super toxic and abusive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pitts.

Being quiet has its advantages. No one knows that fact more intimately than Gerard Pitts.

Sure, it often means being underestimated, overlooked, even forgotten in the shuffle, but Pitts has never cared much for attention anyway.

Another day, another study session led by Meeks.

Pitts watches his best friend fondly as he scrawls equations across the blackboard, his voice steady and certain.

Meeks turns from the board, chalk in hand, meets his eye, and grins. “Pitts? Want to take this one?”

Pitts freezes, pencil halfway to the page.

He hates when Meeks does this, but the glint in his friend’s eyes says it isn’t really about the Math.

It’s about pulling him forward, even if just a little. A smidge of

limelight.

Bloody *saint* that the boy is.

“Uh… twenty-seven?” he tries.

Meeks’ smile widens, soft edges around his eyes as he does, unspeakably fond in his gaze. “Close enough.”

Something tells Pitts it’s not anywhere near correct as the room chuckles around him.

Pitts shakes his head, but warmth seeps through him anyway.

That was Meeks for you, always knowing when to push, when to steady, when to help.

Especially when it came to his best friend.

It had been that way since the very beginning.

It was how they’d met after all.

First grade, Wilhelm Elementary School.

Pitts had been crying in the schoolyard during one recess.

Miss Bates had called on him to recite the multiples of eight, and he’d gotten stuck after four times eight.

The sharp crack of the ruler across his hand hadn’t exactly been encouraging.

She’d sent him outside after, insisting he not return until he could “learn the numbers properly.”

He’d sat alone, nursing his stinging hand, face blotched with tears, desperate to disappear into the scenery.

Then Meeks had wandered over.

He'd lingered for a moment, face unreadable, just watching.

Pitts had braced himself for the inevitable sting of cruel laughter, the

familiar chorus of “blockhead,” “dimwit,” “lamebrain.” That was what always came next.

But instead, Meeks squared his tiny shoulders and declared in his matter-of-fact little voice:

“Miss Bates is just mad because she’s barely smart enough to teach at an elementary level. Don’t take it to heart.”

Even then, he’d sounded impossibly wise. His sweet little face carried more certainty than most grown men, though the mischief dancing in his wide eyes betrayed his age. A mess of red curls, glasses too big for his face, the shortest boy in class by far.

Pitts, tall and awkward even then, had hardly ever crossed paths with him. In school pictures, Pitts always loomed in the back row while Meeks smiled somewhere near the front.

Pitts had sniffled, finally daring to meet his eye. Meeks had taken his hand, gently, like it was something precious, and studied the angry welt from the ruler. He’d tutted, as though disapproving of the punishment itself rather than Pitts’ failure.

“My dad’s a chemist,” he said plainly. “I can get some ointment that might help.”

Then, without hesitation, he’d led Pitts to the bathroom, ran his hand under the cold tap, cooling the burn.

They’d sat side by side the rest of the day, a quiet solidarity forming between them.

And that was that.

Pitts has never looked back.

They’ve been glued at the hip ever since.

Meeks has been the one steady thing in his life ever since. The boy who could untangle numbers and rules that always seemed to knot up in Pitts’ brain.

The boy who made sense of the world when nothing else did. If Pitts had scraped by in school at all, it was all because Meeks had quietly, patiently, made sure of it.

Sometimes he wondered if he'd even have made it to Welton without him.

Thank goodness he did make it. The Poets alone are enough to make the place worth it.

Pitts looks around him now. They're all here, for the first time in a while, the looming Trig exam pulling them together. He knows it's serious when even Nuwanda shows up, though he's claimed the furthest corner of the room like it might bite him.

To Pitts's left, Todd and Neil sit shoulder to shoulder, whispering, stifling giggles every now and then. Closer than is probably warranted.

Still… it's sweet. And Pitts isn't blind.

He's long suspected Neil and Todd's bond ran deeper than most might guess.

Though truth be told, he hasn't spent much time thinking about it. It isn't his business. But he does know what it feels like.

His gaze flicks towards Meeks then, who is scrawling formulas across the board with brisk determination. Their eyes meet, just for a second, Meeks winks, and Pitts feels his heart stutter.

Yes. He knows all too well.

Still, the group has never thrived more. Not since Keating, not since Todd.

The two latest additions to Welton seem to have sparked something in Neil, and by extension, in all of them.

They'd always been a group, of course.

Always been friends. But that was just mostly out of convenience. Meeks and Pitts the inseparable duo; Knox, Charlie, and Neil their own trio; and Cameron tagging along, mostly by virtue of sharing a room with Charlie. Buddies, pals that chatted between classes. Little depth as a whole unit. But pleasant enough.

But now, this year, they're something more.

The Dead Poets Society had bound them together in a way Pitts hadn't thought possible.

For once, he wasn't just "Meeks' shadow." He was *part* of something.

The others laughed at his jokes, sought him out, and *expected* him to be there.

It was small, maybe, but to Pitts it felt monumental, like he'd finally been handed a seat at a table that had always been just out of reach.

He was grateful for it.

Grateful for Keating.

Yes, the man's teachings were strange at times, often confusing, and he was undeniably *eccentric*, especially compared to the other dinosaurs roaming the halls of Welton. But the Captain had done something none of them ever had: he'd cracked the walls of possibility wide open.

For the first time, the future no longer felt like a narrow corridor Pitts was doomed to shuffle down.

He had never thought of himself as a poet.

He didn't have the words, not really. But now he could at least see beyond the constraints, beyond the invisible chains he hadn't even known were there.

He'd always known he wasn't academic. Thoroughly middle of the road. Not brilliant, not awful. Just… average.

Underachieving.

His parents' dream that he'd one day become a "great man" had always felt laughably optimistic.

But *now*? He was starting to wonder if he even needed to be great. Not a businessman, not an accountant, not a lawyer. Not an actor, or a poet, or a writer either. But a listener. Someone steady. Someone others could turn to.

That — *that* felt like a possibility.

His folks wouldn't be *happy*, of course. Not by any stretch. But compared to the ironclad households of some of the other boys, Pitts supposed he was lucky.

He imagined it sometimes: sitting across from someone, listening as

they poured themselves out, being the calm voice that steadied them. He didn't know what shape that future might take… a counselor, perhaps, or maybe simply the kind of friend people trusted.

Whatever it was, the thought of it made him feel… useful.

Needed, in a way that figures and charts never could.

Charlie suddenly bursts into a fit of coughing, exaggerated enough to drag Pitts out of his thoughts.

"*Nuwanda*… you wouldn't happen to be smoking, would you?" Meeks' voice carries that stern edge he sometimes takes on, though amusement lingers beneath it. Arms crossed, brow furrowed…

God, Pitts seriously loves it when he gets all authoritarian like that. It looks *really* good on him.

He scolds himself for the thought, yet that doesn't stop the warmth that follows.

"Why would I ever do a thing like that?" Charlie grins, hands raised in mock innocence. The faint trail of ash smouldering on his desk is not helping the boy's case.

"Nuwanda, if we all get detention because of you, I'm tattling," Pitts says, his tone dry as chalk dust.

Charlie brandishes his pen like a rapier sword, eyes alight with mischief. He clutches dramatically at his chest.

"*Et tu, Pitts?*"

With a groan, he collapses across the desk as though mortally wounded. His books slide sideways, nearly toppling to the floor.

Pitts presses his lips together, fighting the upward twitch at the corner of his mouth. Around them, the others burst into laughter, the kind that rings sharp and sudden, filling the cramped study room with warmth.

How Pitts loves them all.

Charlie's "death" earns a round of applause from Knox and a long-suffering groan from Meeks, who swats at them with the chalkboard eraser, starting in on how *no one takes these sessions seriously*, and *he could just let them all fail if that's what they wante*d. Pitts can still tell

he's amused. Meeks loves mischief as much as the rest do, though he'd never admit it.

The room is still buzzing with laughter when Pitts' gaze drifts elsewhere.

Across the room, Neil and Todd are laughing too, not at Charlie, not exactly, but at each other. Their shoulders touch, their smiles lingering a fraction too long.

A private joke, a private *world*.

Pitts exhales softly, the humor dimming into something quieter.

A private world. Now that would be a fine thing. A place where they could all just be. Where they could seize the day, just as the Captain was always singsonging about, without fear.

If only.

If only the real world didn't demand that such affection be kept secret. If only it didn't feel dangerous to let his gaze linger too long on the boy at the blackboard.

Pitts feels his chest tighten.

He understands Neil and Todd better than they could ever guess.

He wonders if they are together, if they share hidden embraces, call each other their own. Somehow, he doubts it.

He knows how dangerous it would be under these walls. In this institution. He knows how other boys talk. About guys like them. About people like *him*.

It's not *fair*. The way love can bloom so naturally, so fiercely, and still be treated as something rotten.

But being quiet… it has its advantages. There's less chance people notice you, to notice where your gaze lingers, what your thoughts betray.

Silence can be a shield.

It hides want, it hides fear.

It hides the kind of longing that might be mistaken for sin.

That was how Pitts recognised something in Todd that he'd long recognised in himself.

The quiet new kid, afraid even of his own shadow. Todd kept his eyes on the ground when they changed for soccer, as if meeting another's gaze might burn him. He'd mastered the art of being invisible, unassuming. The art of blending into the background.

Don't let them notice. Don't say too much. Never speak your truth.

It kept them safe, yes. But at what cost?

Pitts wondered if Todd ever felt it the way he did, that weight that came from hiding, the ache silence brought. How it held them back, kept true happiness just out of reach.

Sometimes their eyes would meet across the room, brief flickers in the noise and chatter, two quiet souls recognising each other.

Maybe that was its own kind of confession. Its own recognition.

I see you. I know what you are.

Or *maybe*, Pitts muses, he was only projecting.

A scrape of chair legs broke through his reverie. Meeks, finally done with the board, dropped into the seat beside him, already muttering about how Welton never prepared them properly for Trig, how the curriculum was stacked against them from the start.

Pitts smiled faintly, nodding along, though his real thoughts stayed buried where Meeks couldn't see.

Would never see.

Being quiet has its advantages.

He only wished it didn't *have* to.

Mrs Perry.

Patty Perry likes to think of herself as an optimist… at least most of the time.

Sure, she misses Neil terribly when he is boarded at Welton, a piece of her missing every hour he is at school.

But it's for his own good. And Patty *does* still get to see him each week, gets to hear the tales of his days at the school, about all the things he's learned, the praise he's received from teachers.

Better still, she gets to hear about his kind nature, his care for others, the generosity that seems to overflow from him. That should be enough. She tells herself it is.

And yet the ache of his absence lingers.

She swallows it down. Pushes it aside.

Her feelings are not important. Not if Neil is to become what Tom expects him to be.

Because Neil had always been the sweetest child… so kind, sensitive, emotional, playful.

Looking after him at home while he was young, while Tom worked long hours at the office, had been some of the greatest moments of her life.

Watching him, unabashed, a boy full of life, born to be wild and free. The way he'd insist on performing for her, showing off whatever world he'd dreamed up in their backyard.

To see him alive with such passion, such joy in playing pretend. He was a pirate, a lion tamer, a samurai, a jester, an alien, a king. Each persona he embraced so fully, with boundless imagination.

She had to admit, the little boy was quite convincing. Patty had often been pulled into the many worlds her dear son created. He could make the mundane, the everyday gloom, feel lighter. His laughter would echo through the little house like sunlight breaking through clouds.

Neil was the joy of her life.

Then Tom would come home, and that's where things would get ugly.

He would scold her.

"*Why would you encourage the child to play-act? Play-acting is for girls playing house, not for great men. He is soft enough as it is. If he is to act as anything, make it a fighter, a soldier, an army man. None of this soft stuff. Patty, you hear me*?"

It would hurt, the idea of suppressing the kid's imagination, and by extension his feelings, his emotions.

"Soft touch," Tom would often describe their son to Patty. "Too soft, too girly. He needs to be toughened up. Needs a good whipping."

It hurt Patty to hear it. Such vicious words about such a wonderful young boy.

But Tom knew best. Knows best. So Patty holds her feelings in.

As young as three, Neil bore Tom's sharp criticisms.

He wasn't working hard enough in Kindergarten; they called him *pleasant* but not a high achiever, not a top student, only a top *friend*.

That wasn't good enough for Tom. These were *not* admirable traits. And Neil suffered for it.

Sometimes Patty wanted to gather Neil into her arms, whisper that it didn't matter, that being kind and curious was worth more than any grade.

Sometimes she even did, in quiet moments, when Tom was out, but the words would always die in her throat the second she heard her husband's voice in the hall. He footsteps on the staircase.

Better not to contradict him. Better not to make things worse.

Besides, it was for Neil's own good.

Would build his character.

Or so Patty was told to believe.

The "harsh reality of the world" would not be kind if their boy stayed the sweet soul he always had been.

But how Patty wishes it could be different.

But she couldn't complain.

She'd never been a beautiful woman; her parents had never let her forget it. They had insisted she'd die an old maid.

Never to be *blessed with the sanctity of marriage*.

Never to be *loved*.

Never to bear her own children.

Then she'd met Tom. Not a handsome fellow himself. But a powerful businessman. Not rich in wealth, but rich in world experience. He was able to provide for Patty.

To be the man she'd never dreamed she would get to have.

Tom hadn't *cared* for her appearance, yet had still chosen her as his companion.

Had looked past the physical. Had seen her value as a woman.

She *should* be grateful.

She *should* be overjoyed that Tom was generous enough to have her.

To give her a *family*.

That part hadn't been easy. It had taken them a long time to have a baby.

Her pregnancies before Neil hadn't lasted. She would get to the fourth month and… no heartbeat. No movement.

No life.

It was devastating, each loss worse than the last. Patty herself had almost died from the complications of pregnancy. And still no baby to show for it, five years into their marriage.

"No use crying, girl," Tom would say when she sobbed on his shoulder after another painful visit to the matron. "No use weeping. Won't solve the damn thing. Best try again. And try harder this time."

She'd supposed he was right. She was probably not careful enough.

Was probably not nourishing her body well enough.

She would follow all the old wives tales. Would seek advice from friends with young children.

And finally, she fell pregnant again. And this time... it would be different.

This pregnancy, she was determined, would last.

She almost didn't let herself hope. Each day that ticked by, she expected complications, expected pain. Expected lack of movement.

So when Neil lasted into the second trimester, when he lasted into the third, when he survived the complex delivery, when he thrived as a neonate… she knew he was the most precious being to grace planet Earth.

To Tom, he was the last chance at a lasting legacy for the Perrys. The son who would finally make it big, become a success. He was to have the opportunities Tom had never had, that Tom had never even dreamed he would have.

Neil grew to indeed be a great young man. An astute scholar, gifted in all the ways Tom demanded he be. He was a natural, yes, but he worked hard too.

Neil made all decisions with his father in mind. Every extracurricular was approved by Tom, every grade was checked, every exam paper examined, Tom adding notes to where Neil could improve.

On the surface, he appeared to be thriving under Tom's guidance those first few years at Welton.

Patty assumed he wanted everything Tom wanted for him too.

She had been thrilled at this. Perhaps her husband *did* know best.

Though she still did worry.

Tom was *awfully* harsh, even when Neil yielded excellent results. Results that any other father would be bragging about to anyone who would listen.

Tom wasn't just *any* father.

She remembers one evening, not too long ago, when Neil had proudly

brought home an essay marked with a neat red “A.” Tom had read it once, then again, lips pressed thin.

“An *A* is fine,” he said at last, handing it back. “But you see this sentence? Clumsy. Sloppy. An admissions board won’t care about charm, Neil, only precision. Do it over.”

Neil had nodded obediently, but Patty had seen the brightness drain from his face like water from a cup.

Still, Patty knew *nothing* of education, medicine, or what makes a good, strong man.

She was sure Tom was right.

He knew best.

He was head of the household after all.

Besides, Patty had never been smart enough for all that.

Who was *she* to criticise his behaviour?

So she left the men to it.

Yet this year, Neil’s junior year… something has begun to feel... different.

In some ways, Neil seems brighter, lighter.

Much lighter.

There’s color in his cheeks where once there was pallor, a spring in his step where before there was only dutiful order.

But in other ways, his mask has slipped. Tom’s words weigh heavier now; Neil no longer hides it so well.

Where once he’d force a polite smile, now he flinches.

Where once he’d nod attentively through dinner conversation, now his mind drifts. His gaze fixes on some unseen point far beyond the walls of their home, as if caught by something no one else can see.

And there was the unexplained behavior. Like a few weeks before Thanksgiving, when Patty had passed Neil's door late at night and heard him murmuring softly to himself.

Words, sentences, half-whispers that didn't sound like schoolwork.

She had lingered, hand hovering on the knob, weighing whether it was worth checking on him. She decided against it.

Boys daydream, she told herself.

No sense in prying.

So Patty remained clueless as to what might have changed.

That was, until the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

She is at the grocer's, basket hooked over her arm, when she catches a familiar voice. Mrs. Danberry, a woman Patty knows well enough to respect, her social standing not to be taken lightly. The woman is speaking animatedly with another mother of a Welton boy.

Patty slows, pretending to weigh apples, ears tilting toward the conversation.

Patty knows it's wrong to gossip, to *listen in* on gossip. But she needs excitement somewhere.

She's not proud but still listens as the women talk.

"Virginia is just thrilled with the role. She really wants to act. Sweet, really," Mrs. Danberry beams, clearly proud of her daughter.

"Have you seen her rehearse?" the other woman asks.

"No, they won't allow it. Not yet, anyway. But the performance isn't far off. I did catch the tail end of one of her scenes with Neil."

Mrs. Danberry smiles knowingly. "Now, *that* is a talented young man."

Patty stills. With *Neil*? They can't mean her boy.

Surely not.

They must mean another boy. Some other young man with the same name.

But before Patty can convince herself, Mrs. Danberry's eyes land on her across the aisle. She lights up, waving her over with all the eagerness of a woman who adores good gossip.

“Oh, Mrs. Perry!” she trills as Patty approaches. “How *lovely* to see you and how fortuitous! We were just talking about your boy, what a wonder he is in the play! Truly spectacular. Virginia says he carries every scene he’s in. Such presence!”

Patty freezes, a polite smile plastered to her face. Yet her ears ring.

The play?

Her Neil… on stage?

Mrs Danberry barrels on, oblivious. “You must be *so* proud. And to think we’ll get to see them all perform so soon. Oh, it’s bound to be the highlight of the season!”

Patty nods, murmurs something agreeable, though she barely hears her own words. Inside, her thoughts spiral.

Acting.

Pretending.

It is the one thing Tom forbade.

He'll think him too soft, will want to beat it out of him.

Oh dear…oh dear…

“Ah yes.” Patty forces a smile, the words catching in her throat. “He excels in everything he pursues. I am always proud of him.”

Mrs Danberry beams. “I must say, Ginny always insists he’s the best one on that stage. Such poise, such emotion! And the director simply *adores* him. Why, he may even have a *career* there one day!”

She lowers her voice then, conspiratorial but still cheerful. “I admit, I didn’t expect your husband to approve of such a pursuit. He doesn't seem a fan of the arts. But Neil must’ve been very persuasive, convincing him to sign the permission slip.”

Patty’s smile strains tighter still.

Permission slip?

Tom approve?

Her pulse drums in her ears. She imagines Tom’s scowl, the sharp set of his jaw.

Tom would never. Tom could never.

Neil must have…

Oh Neil…

He must have *forged it.*

Oh heavens.

Tom would be *furious*.

Fear ripples through her body, cold and sharp. Her smile falters, and Mrs Danberry's brow furrows. She reaches out, pressing a gentle hand to Patty's forehead.

"Are you *unwell*, dear? Oh, there is a terrible cold going around, isn't there? We'll leave you to your shopping."

Patty is grateful for the opportunity to excuse herself, but as she starts to turn, Mrs Danberry calls out again.

"Oh! Mrs Perry! I'll see you on the 11th, yes? Perhaps we can sit together?" The woman is practically glowing with excitement. Unaware of the turmoil within the fellow mother.

The 11th?

Of December?

Patty's stomach twists. That's less than *two weeks* away. How long has Neil been hiding such a thing?

"Oh yes, of course," she manages somehow, voice still tight, she fakes a cough, covering her mouth. "Oh dear, I am feeling a little under the weather. Maybe something I ate. I'll see you then, Mrs. Danberry. Mrs. Stevens."

She forces another smile, nods politely as the women wave, and turns quickly down the next aisle, heart hammering.

Oh, this is not *good.*

This is terrible.

Tom can not *find out.*

He will not stand for this.

Her sensitive boy, her little *angel*, would not withstand the wrath of his father if he discovered the truth. Tom's disappointment was bad enough; his anger could break Neil in two.

Patty swallows hard, clutching her grocery basket tighter.

No.

She won't allow it.

She will hide it from her husband. This conversation never happened. She never heard a thing.

For Neil's sake and for his *safety*, she has to keep this buried.

That night, as she folds Neil's shirts to send back with him to Welton, her hands tremble so violently she has to sit down.

She presses one palm to the fabric, as if by touch alone she might shield him from what was coming.

She wishes it would.

She hopes her silence will be enough.

What harm could holding her tongue do?

After all, it's all she's been good for before.

Chapter End Notes

I fear I have become a MeeksxPitts stan.

More Anderperry goodness coming soon, I promise. Stay tuned.

Chapter 22: Chapter 22.

Chapter Summary

> Guys I'm not sure why but this one was toughhhh to write. I've had this scene planned since the beginning and wanted to get it right so kept overthinking it. But I am happy with how this turned out and I hope you will be too.

Chapter Notes

> Quick note to say I've now changed the rating to M as a lot of upcoming themes may be a little much for the teen rating. It won't be insane but overthinking is in my nature.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd.

"Alrighty boys, remember, we are representatives of the school." Keating stands in front of the Goodrich Memorial Library, smiling at the throng of excitable students as they tumble off the bus. His eyes twinkle with mischief. "So I fully expect you all to wreak havoc."

Laughter ripples through the group. Charlie whoops loudest, earning a sharp slap on the arm from Cameron, which only encourages him further. He grabs Cameron in a headlock, ruffling his hair until the poor boy squirms free.

Todd hangs back, watching the chaos unfold, when Neil's shoulder brushes against his.

Neil glances at Charlie's antics, then back at Todd, shaking his head in mock despair. There's fondness in his eyes all the same, softening his features.

Todd's breath catches. For a moment, the laughter and shouts around them fade into something distant.

God, Neil's just so… so *pretty* up this close. His eyes usually sit shadowed, dark as onyx, deep and impenetrable. But now, caught in the afternoon light, they've transformed… not black at all, but warm and alive, a glittering amber. Facets Todd never knew existed spark

and shift with every blink, like the light itself is conspiring to enchant Todd body and soul.

The sight roots Todd to the spot, his heart stuttering painfully in his chest. He feels absurd for staring, but how could anyone not, when Neil's gaze shines like something rare, something precious, something meant to be treasured?

He knows he's been staring too much lately.

Far too much.

It's reckless.

It's dangerous.

But he can't help it.

Neil has *always* been mesmerising, even before Todd could admit it to himself. For so long, the thought of Neil catching him had been enough to make him wrench his gaze away, heart hammering with shame.

But now…

Now there's this unspoken thing between them.

Fragile, tentative, and yet… somehow undeniable.

Whatever it is they're both feeling, Todd can sense it shimmering in the space between their glances, a thread spun so fine it might snap if either one of them ever spoke of it.

But it's impossible not to look.

Impossible not to notice how Neil looks back.

Impossible not to get lost in him.

Dangerous as it feels, as though every second of eye contact risks exposing them both.

And yet the danger carries its own kind of thrill.

Like leaning too far over the edge of a rooftop just to feel your stomach drop.

Like holding a gun to your head, but not pulling its trigger.

Todd tells himself to look away, to hide before Neil sees too much. But then Neil's gaze lingers a fraction longer than it should, and Todd's breath catches.

How had he been so blind? It feels impossible, laughable, that he could have missed it, the way Neil's eyes study him, filled with a softness Todd has never seen him give anyone else.

A warmth that seems reserved only for him.

For a moment, it's enough to make Todd's chest feel light, as though some unseen weight has finally lifted.

But almost instantly, Lady Doubt claws her way back in.

Neil would never want you like that.

He's just kind. That's all.

That night … the way he leaned into your touch … it wasn't real.

It wasn't special.

He was only humoring you.

Taking pity on your pathetic queer little feelings.

Todd swallows hard, throat tight, and tears his gaze away. He has to stop. Needs to stop before it devours him whole.

Then Neil nudges him lightly, the brush of his shoulder warm, grounding. When Todd forces himself to look up, Neil's eyes are steady on his, soft, laced with gentle concern, as though he can see right through him.

"You okay?" Neil asks, his voice low, meant only for him.

Todd nods quickly, but his eyes betray him. They linger, helplessly drinking Neil in.

God, he's so beautiful. *Bewitching*. The curve of his pink lips, the sharp-sweet lines of his face, the soft pale skin that seems to glow in the daylight. Todd aches to touch him, to trace the delicate edges as though Neil were spun from glass or woven from moonlight.

Fairy-like, he thinks suddenly. Whimsical and untouchable, just as he'll be when he embodies Puck onstage. It fits too well.

He wants … no, he *craves*, to pull him close, to press his mouth against his, to taste what it would be like to love him without shame, without fear.

But he *can't*. He never can.

So instead, Todd nudges him back, the smallest gesture, a silent signal: *I'm fine.*

Neil doesn't quite believe it. Todd can see it in his eyes, but before he can say anything more, Keating's voice carries over the group once more.

"Now, boys, it wasn't exactly *easy* convincing Nolan to allow you come on this trip," he says, hands clasped dramatically. "Especially during a school day. So I do expect you to take inspiration for your upcoming essays."

A groan rises from the class in unison. Keating shakes his head, rolling his eyes with mock despair.

"Really, boys? That's all it takes these days? Any of the other fine fossils here at Welton would have you chained to a desk, copying from a dusty lecture on this place. Paragraph after paragraph of lifeless drivel."

"Captain, whatever happened to *sucking the marrow out of life*?" Charlie heckles from the back, grinning ear to ear.

Keating allows a chuckle, shaking his head as though he'd expected nothing less. "You may suck the marrow, Mr. Dalton. But while you do so, please do make some notes."

The boys erupt with laughter, the kind only Keating seems able to draw from them during school hours. Even Cameron hides a reluctant smile.

"Now be gone, fair gentles. Remain in pairs and take your time. We have one hour, then we'll meet again out front to discuss our findings. Adiós, fare thee well, adieu!" Keating dismisses them with a theatrical wave.

The boys scatter, pairing off quickly. Neil turns to Todd without hesitation, dimples flashing. "C'mon." He gives him a little nudge that sends heat racing through Todd's veins.

The library is breathtaking. Vaulted ceilings arch like cathedral spires, every inch lined with shelving stretching so high Todd swears they must scrape the heavens. The air smells faintly of old paper and polished wood, heavy with the weight of decades.

Todd feels dizzy with it… as though he's stepped into the very heart of his imagination itself.

A thousand voices, a thousand stories hum around him, just beyond the bindings.

Whole *worlds* waiting, waiting for Todd to explore them. Waiting for him to invent his own.

He can hardly breathe.

This, he thinks, *this is what freedom must feel like.*

He turns to Neil, a rare grin breaking across his face, unguarded and wide—

—and finds Neil already watching him. His mouth slightly parted, cheeks flushed with some unspoken heat. His dark eyes catch the light like glassy pools, gleaming with a tenderness that makes Todd's stomach somersault.

Todd freezes, blood roaring in his ears. *What*… what does *that* look

mean?

Neil coughs and glances away, almost too quickly. “Nice place, huh?”

His tone is casual, too casual.

Todd almost laughs, except his heart feels like it’s about to take flight.

“Uh… yeah. It’s… I like it.” Todd stammers, the words tumbling clumsy and half-formed.

Stupid. *So stupid.*

Neil’s lips twitch, as though he’s biting back a smile. For a breath, Todd thinks he’s caught, but instead Neil turns, scanning the towering shelves with sudden purpose. His eyes light up when he spots something.

“Aha! Whitman.” Neil points across the aisle like a victorious explorer. “A whole section. That’s gotta be like a kid finding a candy stand for you, Toddy!”

Todd laughs, and the distraction works… a little. But the way Neil had been watching him lingers. As though Todd were something sacred, something worth beholding.

The thought leaves him weightless. He floats after Neil, the joy warming his chest suddenly less about the books, and more about the boy leading him toward them.

They linger in the Whitman section far longer than planned, lost among the spines until nearly twenty minutes have passed. By the time they emerge, both are carrying several volumes like stolen treasures.

Todd’s eyes wander as they head back through the aisles. In the far corner, he spots Meeks and Pitts hunched over a massive chemistry textbook, heads nearly touching as they read.

Typical Meeks — finding a way to study even in a library filled with every kind of book imaginable.

And typical Pitts — glued faithfully to his side, like Meeks' keen shadow.

As though sensing Todd's glance, Pitts looks up. For the briefest second, their eyes meet. Pitts offers him a small, almost *knowing* smile before turning back to the page Meeks reads out loud from.

Todd shifts uneasily. Pitts does this sometimes, watches him.

Not unkindly.

Never mocking.

Just curious.

It's as though Pitts is piecing Todd together, fitting him into some quiet conclusion he hasn't voiced aloud.

It's unsettling… and yet, strangely comforting. Knowing he has people looking out for him.

Noticing his existence at all.

Across the other side of the room, Charlie and Knox have unearthed some lurid romance novel and are performing it with theatrical gusto. Knox takes his role far too seriously, while Charlie bellows out the most scandalous lines with relish.

The nearby librarian glares over her spectacles, finger pressed to her lips. "Shhh!"

Charlie bows with mock solemnity, then immediately launches into the next passage even louder.

Keating, also nearby, is doing a terrible job of hiding his laughter behind a volume of Italian poetry, failing his role as the stern academic entirely. Not that the boys would expect sternness of him.

Cameron stands off on his own, rifling through a massive tome Todd can't even begin to place. Probably something exceedingly dull. And yet… Cameron looks oddly content, as though he's stumbled into his own little heaven. Todd supposes there's something for everyone here.

Todd feels a flicker of pride as he watches them all scattered through the library's vastness.

Each boy lost in his own world, yet still so wholly together.

Seizing the day, each in their own way.

The sight makes Todd's chest swell.

This.

This is what Keating meant, he thinks.

It isn't about defiance for the sake of it, or word perfect poetry in perfect formulations.

It's about choice, joy, the freedom to follow whatever stirs the heart.

For once, it feels like they're all on a path that stretches beyond Welton's narrow corridors of *greatness*.

And Todd… Todd feels *part* of it.

Not a shadow on the edge, not the odd one out, but *one* of them.

One thread in the tapestry.

The warmth of it hums through him, so steady and joyful that he almost lets himself believe this could last forever.

He's so lost in the vision, so cocooned in his fragile happiness, that he doesn't notice the figure approaching until a voice cuts sharp through the hush.

Too close. Too familiar.

A chill rushes down his spine.

It can't be.

How…?

"*Todd Anderson.* As I live and breathe."

No.

Max.

Max Thompson.

His Balincrest tormentor. The ringleader of the cruel group of boys who tormented Todd for years.

The name alone makes Todd's stomach lurch.

Memories slam into him like blows: his skull cracking against the ground while boys roared with laughter, Max's voice always the loudest.

The locker slams, the jeers during rowing practice.

The chants when he undressed, every word sharpened into a slur.

His pants yanked down in front of the whole assembly hall.

The smirks.

The whispers.

The rumors.

The way boys who once happily sat beside Todd in class would suddenly edge away, afraid of catching whatever Max decided Todd had.

Terrified of being at the receiving end of Max's hatred.

The echo of it all rings louder than the library's hush.

Todd turns before he can stop himself, heart hammering so loud he swears the whole library can hear.

And there he is… Max, hand on hip, a smile stretched too wide across his face.

On the surface, mock-pleasant.

But Todd knows that glint in his eye. Knows exactly what it means.

Nothing good.

"O…oh. Hi, Max."

The words tumble out, clumsy, useless. Todd curses himself instantly.

Why now?

Why can't he ever play it cool, just once?

Why is he always so painfully, humiliatingly *himself*?

Max shifts his weight and leans against the marble pillar beside them, arms crossed, eyes never leaving Todd's face.

That smirk, lazy, crooked, practiced, is exactly the same as it had been at Balincrest. Todd feels fourteen again, small and cornered.

"You look *no* different." Max tilts his head, eyes narrowing as though he's inspecting something pinned under glass. "I heard your folks pumped you full of steroids so you'd finally hit puberty. Guess you can't believe everything you hear, eh, Toddy?"

His grin widens, slow and mean. "Still small. Still soft. Thought maybe by now you'd have… grown into yourself." Another pause, deliberately cruel. "Every dog has his day, though, right?"

The words land sharper than Todd wants to admit, each one pressing on an old bruise. His throat tightens, heat prickling up his neck.

"U-uh… yeah…" he manages, voice paper-thin.

"Hmmm, and still meek as ever, I see. C-c-cat got your tongue?" Max mock-stutters before laughing at his own performance. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding. You know me, a big ol' joker. Right, Todd?"

A joker.

Pfft, that's rich.

Max wouldn't know funny if it hit him square in the forehead. His so-

called “humor” was never wit or wordplay, just cheap digs and bruises disguised as banter. Nothing clever. Nothing kind.

If Max were truly funny, he wouldn’t need to tear others down. Wouldn’t need to grind his heel into anyone who seemed smaller, softer, different.

As though he himself was anything to be impressed by.

Max was all talk. All projection. A hollow laugh wrapped in fists for good measure.

Todd wishes, achingly, that he could say it. That he could fling the truth back in Max’s face, make him choke on it.

But he doesn’t.

He never does.

“Y-yeah,” he mutters instead, voice brittle, pitiful even to his own ears.

The silence after tastes bitter.

He wants to speak, to summon the courage to tell Max to back off, but the words knot in his throat, too heavy to push past his lips.

Max seems downright delighted by his silence. Taking it as intimidation, which seems to be his goal.

He chews his lip, eyes roving over Todd with a kind of cruel amusement, leaning just a little too close as if savoring the discomfort he causes.

Neil shifts beside him. Todd feels his presence like a shield and risks a glance. Neil’s brow is furrowed, arms folded tight across his chest, his whole frame taut as a bowstring. His eyes flick rapidly between them, concern etched deep in his face, as though he’s already piecing together the cruelty Todd won’t voice aloud.

“Hi,” Neil says evenly, his voice steadier than Todd could ever hope for. “I’m Neil Perry. Todd’s roommate at Welton. And you are…?”

Max’s grin spreads wider, delighted, like a predator catching the scent of blood. “Oh, a roommate, huh? I bet Todd *loves* that. All close and personal with another guy, eh?”

The implication oozes into the space between them like a poison. Neil's frown deepens. His lips part as if to challenge him, to demand clarity but Max barrels on, savoring every syllable.

"I'm Max. Was at Balincrest with ol' Toddy here. Boy was a *barrel* of laughs, weren't you, Todd?" He winks, smirk curling like a knife.

Todd feels his face burn hotter and hotter, shame rising like a fever. He swears the whole library can see it, the flush searing up his neck, branding him.

His skin prickles with the memory of laughter, jeers, the weight of eyes on him back at Balincrest. He wishes desperately the floorboards would split open and swallow him whole.

Max prowls closer, circling almost, voice low and oily. "Not much of a talker, are ya? You never were. Always more of an observer. Isn't that right, Todd? Loved to get a good *look* at everyone."

The words land like a slap. Todd's stomach lurches; bile creeps up his throat. His hands clench at his sides. He can't breathe, can't move, caught in the echo of every humiliation he thought he'd left behind.

Neil shifts forward, just a step, barely a few inches, but enough. His shoulder edges in front of Todd's chest, a solid line of defense. His posture sharpens, protective, daring Max to push further.

The relief hits Todd like air after drowning. For the first time in this encounter, he exhales. He wishes more than anything that he could hold his own ground. Fight for himself. Maybe in any other circumstance he would be able to.

But with Max… his body betrays him. Muscles locked, throat sealed shut.

Full freeze mode.

And yet Neil, gallant as ever, steps in without hesitation. Solid. Unflinching. A shield where Todd cannot be one for himself. Gratitude swells so sharply in Todd's chest it almost aches.

"It's always nice to have a reunion," Neil says, his voice calm but tight at the edges. Protective. "But we're here on a field trip, and we don't have long. It was nice to meet you, *Max*." He tries for civility, but the disgust lacing his tone as he says his name is unmistakable.

Max chuckles low, eyes glinting, looking right at Todd. "*Aww*, how sweet. You've found yourself a pretty little bodyguard, big man. Bet he wouldn't want to protect you if he really knew you. If he knew what a little perv you are, Anderson." His voice sharpens, dropping its false levity for something venomous, baring his teeth with each word.

Todd's stomach twists. Max had spoken so loudly that he can feel eyes on him. People turning, whispering, a few even laughing under their breath. The humiliation is suffocating, shame crawling up his spine like fire ants. His knees threaten to give way.

It feels just like he's a Freshman again. Little and unimportant.

"That is enough, Max." Neil steps forward, his voice low but firm. Calm on the surface, but Todd can hear the steel underneath, each word deliberate. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Max leans in until Todd can feel his breath, practically spitting the words. "Or what, pretty boy? You gonna hit me?"

Neil doesn't so much as flinch. His eyes darken, voice sharpening like a blade. "Hitting isn't my style, halfwit."

A cruel bark of laughter erupts from Max, loud enough to draw more stares. He looks ready to push further, to twist the knife deeper, when a shadow looms behind him.

"It may not be his style," a voice cuts in, sharp and certain.

Max turns… but… too slow. A fist cracks against his jaw, the sound ringing through the vaulted hush of the library. He crumples, sprawled and stunned, clutching at his face as the perpetrator shakes out his knuckles with an all too familiar wolfish grin.

"But it *is* mine," Charlie finishes smugly.

Gasps ripple through the room. Max's face flushes beet-red as he scrambles upright, rage contorting his features.

He lunges low, aiming to take Charlie's legs out, but Charlie sidesteps cleanly, circling him with a boxer's ease, grin never fading.

The livid librarian slams her hand on the desk bell, its shrill clang slicing through the chaos.

"Enough!" She shrieks so loudly that Todd flinches.

But Max barrels forward again, ignoring protests from the librarian and lands a wild punch to Charlie's shoulder. The sound is a dull, heavy thud. Todd winces, it *must* hurt, but Charlie doesn't give Max the satisfaction of seeing it.

Instead, he bares his teeth in a grin, rolling his shoulder as if shaking it off, and steps right back into Max's space.

That's when Keating's hands land firmly on Charlie's shoulders from behind. Gentle yet firm.

"Mr. Dalton." His voice is calm, steady, but with an edge that makes Charlie freeze. "Let's not create any more of a scene than we already have. C'mon."

Charlie bristles, jaw tight, but after a beat he lets Keating pull him back.

The librarian flounces over, eyes ablaze, steam practically coming out her ears. "These boys need to leave this building immediately. They could have destroyed priceless works!"

"Certainly, Miss Green," Keating says smoothly, dipping his head with a flourish that borders on mockery. "But no damage has been done. We will leave quietly. You have my word."

Todd and Neil stand rooted, hearts pounding in the silence that follows. The fight feels like it's still vibrating through the floorboards, through their ribs.

Charlie saunters back over, rolling his shoulder like it's nothing, but the swagger has dimmed a little. He looks almost sheepish under their wide-eyed stares

"Uh, hey folks." Charlie grins almost lamely, rubbing at his knuckles.

Todd's feels words catching in his throat. Why would Charlie do such a thing, for *him* of all people? Not for Neil, not for show, but for his honor.

The thought hits so hard it feels unreal.

People don't fight for Todd Anderson. People don't stand up for him, not against boys like Max.

At Balincrest, the best he could ever hope for was silence. Averted

eyes. Survival.

And yet here Charlie stands, shoulders squared, as though the choice had been obvious.

Todd blinks at him, dazed, trying to summon words that refuse to come.

“Charlie… w-w…”

Charlie shrugs, casual as if he hadn’t just decked a boy in the middle of a library.

“No one makes *my* friends feel lesser, Anderson. Not on my watch.” His voice is quiet but steady, like it’s the simplest truth. “I did what I had to.”

The words slam into Todd harder than Max’s fists ever could. *My friends.* Not Neil’s shadow. Not some tagalong tolerated out of pity. Charlie Dalton, loud, impossible, fearless, saw him as his *friend.*

Defended him like he … like Todd matters to him.

Something in Todd’s chest cracks wide open. He can’t speak. His vision stings. He takes a trembling breath and, before he can think better of it, pulls Charlie into a quick, desperate hug.

Charlie stiffens for a second, then lets out a startled laugh.

“Oh, come off it. It was nothing. You sap.” He waves him off as Todd steps back, but Todd catches the flicker of pride, the faint curl at Charlie’s mouth, the light in his eyes.

For all his bravado, Charlie looks pleased.

Beside him, Neil’s expression softens marginally, as though the sight of his best friend and his roommate together offers him some comfort. But even with that, something in the exchange with Max seems to have struck deeper. His jaw tightens, eyes flickering away too quickly, shoulders drawn a little taut. He looks shaken in a way Todd rarely sees.

Neil doesn't say a word as they pile back onto the bus.

Keating, ever the diplomat, had managed to smooth things over with the Balincrest teachers, insisting that Max had been the aggressor and his own students were simply defending themselves. They had grudgingly agreed to let the matter go on one condition: Charlie was to keep his distance from Max.

From the back of the group, Charlie had scoffed, muttering something about not even wanting to touch that rancid boy with a twenty-foot pole. Keating had almost laughed, eyes twinkling despite himself, before ushering them all out with a gentle, "That's enough, Mr. Dalton."

Now, as the bus rattles back down the road, Todd risks a glance at Neil. The other boy stares out the window, jaw tight, unusually quiet.

"You ok?" Todd's voice comes out smaller than he intends, a tremor at the edges.

At that, Neil finally turns, and his expression softens. He lets his hand brush lightly against Todd's, thumb stroking his palm, fleeting, a secret touch and nods once. Still silent, but the gesture speaks more than words.

It speaks reassurance. A silent *I'm here. It's alright.*

Still, Todd's chest feels tight.

Did Max's poison stick?

Did Neil hear "perv" and wonder, even for a moment, if it were true?

Does he think Todd is sick? Twisted?

Does he think Todd is taking advantage of him?

Unlikely.

Neil wouldn't have reached for him otherwise.

He would've recoiled.

Besides Neil isn't cruel.

But the doubt won't unclench her grip. No matter how hard he tries to reassure himself.

Todd spends the rest of the ride to Welton spiraling, staring out the window, every bump in the road rattling the questions louder in his head.

Can Max have ruined everything?

Chapter End Notes

This was gonna have Neil's POV following events in the same chapter but that one is taking even longer to polish and this one is long as is, so stay tuned. I'm hoping to get that one out asap.

Also don't look up the library it's not nearly as mystical as I describe but suspend your disbelief.

Some big chapters are coming so I'll definitely be taking a lot more time on those and they will probably get longer. I hope you all enjoy them regardless.

Chapter 23: Chapter 23.

Chapter Notes

> Hiii all, I took a little break to do some brainstorming of how events will transpire and planning out some story beats, so stuff should pick up again soon. I have everything in this fic planned out up until the end and I have even started writing the epilogue (I know) and pivotal chapters. So, I fear this is going to end up being unbelievably long, so I hope you have patience (and interest).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil.

Neil steps out of the communal showers, steam clinging to his skin, his mind still spiraling after the day's events.

Of course he'd known Todd had been badly bullied at Balincrest. Jeffrey's vague telling a few weeks ago had made that much clear, though Neil had suspected he'd been spared the ugliest details.

He'd been disturbed by the idea of anyone saying a single unkind word to the sweet boy. Aside from his painful shyness and lack of confidence, Todd was practically flawless in Neil's eyes, kind, patient, loyal, smart without a trace of arrogance. And his talent for poetry, his quiet devotion to language… oh, how inspiring he is.

The thought of anyone trying to dim that light had always made Neil's chest ache. Even the idea of someone telling Todd to tone himself down, to hide, to shrink, had felt unbearable.

But nothing, no story or shadow, could have prepared him for Max Thompson.

For the sneering face in the library.

For the venom in that boy's voice.

For the towering body cornering Todd, going out of his way to hunt him down.

Neil can still see it now.

Todd standing there, rooted to the spot, shrinking into himself while Max circled like a predator savoring the kill.

Todd's silence, his stammer, the way his face burned red with humiliation, all of it seared into Neil's memory.

And Max, drinking it in with glee.

How could anyone look at Todd Anderson, gentle, luminous, unfathomably kind, and twist him into something *shameful*?

Todd, who flushes like the dawn when he's embarrassed.

Todd, who listens with his whole body.

Todd, whose rare smile is sunlight breaking through storm clouds.

Todd, who carries quiet bravery in his very bones, in his veins, even if he can't see it himself.

And Max… Max tried to tear all of that down with a handful of cruel words.

The sting of those words lingers in Neil's chest. Not just bullying.

It wasn't just cruelty; it was *hatred*.

The kind that punishes a boy for nearness, for tenderness, for the crime of looking at another boy as though he mattered.

Prejudice, sharp and blatant, spat like poison in front of the whole library.

It makes too much sense. Suddenly, every half-glance, every aborted touch, every time Todd turned away as though burned by his own feelings, it all sharpens into focus.

The way Todd's hands clench at his sides, the way he both leans into Neil and pulls away all at once.

It wasn't just shyness. It was *fear*.

Because now he understands. Not just Todd's silence, but the magnitude of what they're up against.

This isn't a quiet, private ache anymore; it's something the world could see. Something it would be eager to destroy.

He's been so caught up hiding from his father, hiding his acting, hiding the very pieces of himself that make him feel alive, that he'd almost forgotten this deeper, darker truth, buried in the innermost vault of his soul.

He loves *Todd*. That much he can admit to himself.

But the reality of that love?

The reality of *loving* another boy?

That's the threshold he's avoided crossing.

He thinks of Max's face, the curl of his lip, the satisfaction in it. If a boy like that could wield so much cruelty in a public space, merely from his assumptions, from his judgements of Todd….What would others do if they knew?

If they saw what lived between him and Todd, all that quiet, tender wanting?

A cold pulse moves through him.

He's always thought himself brave.

He's endured a plethora of suffering, kept himself together while obeying his father, adhering to rules, meeting the suffocating expectations that seem to choke the life from him.

Then later defying those same expectations, pursuing acting, deliberately disobeying his father.

Finally carving out his own path.

But this? This is different.

Defying his father feels almost simple compared to defying an entire world that insists this part of him is wrong.

What if his love isn't something that *frees* Todd, but something that *endangers* him?

What if being near Neil only paints a brighter target on Todd's back?

The thought twists, ugly and unrelenting. For the first time, Neil wonders if courage might mean stepping back.

If love, in its purest form, might mean *restraint*.

He presses a palm against his chest, trying to steady the tremor beneath his ribs.

It doesn't help.

Because now that he's seen the fear in Todd's eyes… and the hatred in Max's, he can't unsee either.

But being with Todd, everything feels so simple. Being near him, watching his wonder unfold, coaxing him gently out of his shell, those things are effortless.

Loving him is effortless.

The thought of showing him, of proving to Todd how beautiful and extraordinary he is, *that* feels like breathing.

But what Max forced into the light today, that's what terrifies him. The world watching. The world twisting that love into ugliness.

People like Max trying to tear Todd apart for it.

The thought makes Neil's stomach twist.

He wants so badly to be Todd's sanctuary, the one who lifts him up, who makes him feel precious.

Todd deserves *joy*. He deserves *freedom*.

He deserves love, without shame, without fear.

And Neil aches with the need to give him all of that, even if the world is ready to punish them for it.

But Neil knows now, with brutal clarity, that his love could cost Todd more than either of them can afford.

That every moment of tenderness might be another risk. But that risk… it feels so worth it … so…

Neil exhales shakily, running a hand through his damp hair.

God, what is he going to do?

What *can* he do?

The questions churn as he steps into their shared dorm, his mind a jumble of half-formed thoughts and half-buried fears.

Todd, who'd clearly been lounging on his bed, bolts upright too quickly. Like a little baby deer caught in the headlights. Neil's heart jumps at the sight.

But Todd's beauty can't make up for his avoidant gaze, the way he seems to flinch away.

He's been skittish all evening, ever since the library. Nervous glances, short answers, like Neil's very presence unsettles him.

Neil wonders if he should have done more. Should he have stepped in harder? Thrown a punch the way Charlie did?

But no. He knows, deep down, Todd would never want that. Todd hates violence. He'd even scolded Charlie on the bus, though Neil could see the gratitude shimmering underneath. Charlie's fist may have been reckless, but it had stopped something ugly from spiraling further out of control.

"Hey." Neil closes the door softly behind him, shaking damp hair from his forehead. He watches how Todd's eyes stay down, avoiding him, like even looking at him might be too much.

"Hey," Todd replies, voice tentative.

Neil stands there for a moment, weighing what to say. He knows bringing up the incident might make Todd retreat further into himself, but then again, if he avoids it, Todd might mistake his silence for agreement with Max's hateful rhetoric.

God. Why is it never easy?

Why can it never be simple?

Why can't they just say everything they need to?

Why can't *he* be brave enough to allow some vulnerability?

He knows he needs to speak—to check in with Todd, at the very least. To make sure he knows that nothing, *nothing*, could ever push Neil

away.

“How are you feeling? Today was a little… intense,” he says at last.

What a complete and utter understatement.

Neil feels almost embarrassed but Todd lets out a weak titter, the sound brittle at the edges but still music to Neil’s ears. If he could bottle that sound up, keep it somewhere safe, treasure it forever, he would.

“You could say that again,” Todd breathes out. There’s a flicker of ease in his tone now, enough to make Neil relax a little.

Neil crosses the room and sits beside him on the bed. Close, closer than he probably should but he doesn’t care. No one can see them here.

Boys can comfort each other.

It’s not a *crime*.

He knows he should keep some distance, but damn it, he doesn’t want to. He wants to be selfish. He wants to be near him.

Craves it.

It feels deeply unfair. That other boys can openly love, can show affection without consequence. They can hold their girls’ hands, court them, tell them what they feel without complication.

Why can’t that be them?

Neil closes his eyes, breathing in slowly. He’s not even sure what to do now that Todd’s here, so close, yet impossibly far. A breath away and still lightyears.

And there’s so much else weighing on him.

The play is just over a week away, and he’s not sure how much longer he can keep it from his father. Lately, Mr. Perry’s been watching him more closely, suspicious, though of *what* Neil can’t quite tell.

Maybe he senses the change in him. The lightness. The quiet freedom that’s been creeping in since the play began, since *Todd*.

Neil’s tried to hide it, to put the dutiful son back on like a costume. It

hasn't worked.

Mr. Perry's questions about grades have been getting more pointed. Nothing new, but heavier.

Since Thanksgiving, his father has been upping the ante: *"This is your junior year, boy. Not the time for rest. Not the time for distractions. Junior year is a dress rehearsal for senior year. You can't drop the ball now, you hear me?"*

Neil's grades haven't slipped, not even close. In fact, despite the play, despite Keating's unorthodox methods, his marks have *improved.*

But of course, "the best" is never enough for Mr. Perry. There's always higher to climb, further to reach.

And sometimes Neil fears that if he keeps climbing, he'll lose his footing entirely, fall, and never be able to get back up again.

The thought makes him shudder.

What will ever be enough?

His body must give away the inner turmoil he feels, because Todd finally looks up.

"Are you okay?" Todd asks.

Typical. The boy faces his worst tormentor in front of half the town and still worries about *him.*

What a fucking angel.

"Yeah, of course." Neil tries for nonchalance, but Todd's deepening frown tells him he's failed.

And of course, Todd goes straight to self-blame.

"Neil… I'm so... I'm really sorry Max dragged you into all this—what he said to you, I—"

"Hey, hey, none of this." Neil cuts in gently, finally allowing his hand to brush against Todd's in a quiet reassurance.

Typical Todd, always finding new ways to blame himself, even when he's done nothing wrong.

“I wasn’t thinking about any of that, actually,” Neil says. “Just… my father.”

At that, Todd lets his hand curve slightly around Neil’s, spelling comfort in the smallest gesture.

God, he really is an angel.

“Are you sure? I was worried Max had upset you. And that I couldn’t… I couldn’t stand up for myself. I’m such a—”

“Hey. No. Stop that,” Neil cuts in again. “You need to stop blaming yourself for everything, Todd. You did nothing wrong. Max deserved what he got. Charlie really did a number on him, huh?”

That earns them both a laugh, soft and fragile, but real. Still, Todd studies him closely, gaze searching, as though he can see every shadow moving through Neil’s mind.

“Are you sure you’re okay, though? You were a little quiet on the way back.”

Oh. *That.*

The silence had been less about Max and more about the flood that came after.

The truth of what Todd has suffered.

The truth of what their feelings might cost them.

“It was just…” Neil swallows, voice low, honest. “It was really *hard*, seeing someone talk to you like that.”

Todd’s face flushes, deep and uncertain.

Even after months at Welton, after all the bonds he’s formed with Neil and the others, he still never quite seems to believe that anyone truly values him. That anyone could care about his wellbeing.

Neil wants to *shake* him.

How can he not realise how *precious* he is?

How much he means to him?

Todd gives a small shrug, his telltale sign he’s about to downplay

things, as always.

“Oh, it was—” Todd begins, but Neil cuts in before he can finish.

“Don’t say it’s okay. It *wasn’t* okay. No one has the right to speak to you that way. He was asking for that punch.”

Color rises faintly along Todd’s neck as his gaze drops to his hands. He twists a loose thread on the blanket, fingers trembling just enough for Neil to notice. The sight tugs sharply at something in his chest.

“I know…” Todd says quietly. “And I didn’t exactly like how he was treating you either.”

Neil lets out a short, unsteady huff, shaking his head. “Guys being jerks to me, I can handle. But him…insisting on harassing you, saying those awful things—that’s…” His voice falters, the words catching somewhere between anger and ache. He swallows hard. “That’s different.”

A quiet settles between them, thick with everything unspoken. Neil glances down at their almost-touching hands, the small space between them feeling impossibly wide.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, his tone softening. “I just… I wish I could’ve done more. I wish I’d been there *back then*, I mean. I wish I could’ve stopped him ever thinking it was okay to demean someone as… as unbelievable as you.”

Todd’s breath stirs, shallow. A faint, uncertain smile tugs at his lips, but his eyes stay fixed on the space between them. He looks like he’s standing at the edge of something he’s afraid to name.

“Neil… you don’t have to say stuff like that. You don’t need to flatter me. I know you can be protective of all your friends, but—”

“I feel most protective of you,” Neil says before he can stop himself. The truth lands softly, irrevocably.

Todd’s eyes flick up, startled. For a heartbeat, he looks as though he’s forgotten how to breathe. His face is still flushed, his expression conflicted, but he doesn’t look away.

“And I don’t *flatter* you,” Neil says softly, his voice steady but low. “If anything, I… I downplay it.”

What is he *doing*?

He knows he's being too transparent, teetering on the edge of saying far too much. But Todd has to understand, none of this is pity. None of it is obligation. Every word, every glance, every small kindness comes from the same place.

Because he *cares*.

Because he *loves* him.

"*Neil*…" Todd whispers, the word barely a breath.

They're shoulder to shoulder now, faces only inches apart. One small tilt, one reckless lean, and it would all be done.

Todd's lashes flutter; his gaze flickers once, helplessly, to Neil's mouth.

He wants this too.

Maybe even as badly as Neil does.

What would be the harm? Neil thinks. *Just one soft thing. One truth. A testing of the waters.*

Neil moves.

Not fast, not clumsy, careful, the moment requires some delicacy.

His fingers rise toward Todd's jaw, the motion meant to steady, to be gentle. Todd doesn't flinch. If anything, he leans a fraction closer.

A thousand possibilities crowd his head, consequences, cautions, a ledger of risks, and yet when he looks into those wide, sapphire eyes the danger scrapes at the edges and thins.

The world reduces to the soft plane of Todd's cheek, the slow inhale at his collarbone.

The air hums.

Heat gathers in Neil where breath meets breath.

It's almost unbearably close.

He can see Todd's eyes dilating, feels his breath catching.

He can feel the tilt of Todd's chin, can almost feel the warm promise of his lips—

—Then the door crashes open.

The spell shatters.

They jolt apart, all startled limbs and half-swallowed breaths. Neil nearly topples backward, Todd jerks upright so quickly the bed creaks beneath them.

The air between them feels abruptly cold, exposed.

Cameron stands in the doorway, eyes darting between the two with amused bewilderment at their clumsy display, which quickly sharpens into irritation.

"Fellas," Cameron starts, voice sharp, brisk, clipped, not even acknowledging the compromising way they must've looked a moment ago. Neil can't tell if he's grateful or humiliated.

Probably both.

"I can't stand Dalton. He's driving me up the wall. One of you has to swap dorms tonight. I think I'll kill him otherwise."

Neil glances at Todd and sees the color rise in his cheeks again, high and vivid. Every instinct in him screams to reach out, to bridge the inches between them, to kiss him anyway, to forget Cameron, forget everything.

But of all the boys to walk in right now, Cameron is the one whose reaction he is most unsure of.

Charlie would've grinned, tossed off some crude joke, told them to put a sock on the door.

Pitts and Meeks would've quietly excused themselves, pretending they'd seen nothing at all.

Knox would've just changed the subject to his latest romantic disaster.

But Cameron… Neil doesn't know.

He likes him, truthfully. More than he knows most of the others do. He recognizes the tension behind Cameron's eyes, the same kind of pressure that lives in Neil's own chest. The quiet war of expectation and fear. Cameron's family is nearly as severe as his father is, maybe even worse.

He's not a bad kid, Neil thinks. Just conditioned. Conforming because it's the only way he knows how to survive.

Still, Neil's pulse thrums. He watches for something, hatred, judgment, disgust, braces for the blow.

But none comes.

Cameron's expression holds nothing but exasperation, as though he's walked in on nothing more scandalous than a late-night study session. He just waits, expectant, still caught up in his own roommate grievances.

Neil swallows, pulse still hammering. "Uh… what'd he do now?" His voice cracks, and he clears his throat, trying to disguise it.

Cameron groans, dragging a hand down his face. "He brought back that ridiculous romance novel, the one the librarian was chewing him out for. It's filthy. He's been reading it out loud to me. *Loudly*. Like it's Shakespeare. And I'm trying to *study*."

Neil wants to be patient, he really does. Wants to summon some scrap of sympathy. But Christ. Why should he care that Charlie's being Charlie?

Why did Cameron have to come *here*?

Why now, of all moments, when they almost…

God, they *almost*...

They were a breath away from everything he's wanted, everything he's been terrified to want.

And now it's gone. Slipped right through his fingers.

Why does fate keep finding new ways to interrupt them?

"Why don't you swap with Knox?" Neil says, forcing a note of ease into his voice. "He didn't seem to mind the, uh, lewdness."

But Cameron's already shaking his head, lips pressed into a thin, determined line. Neil feels the faint spark of hope die before it can take root. The boy's made up his mind.

"Tried Knox already," Cameron says, waving a hand in frustration. "His roommate went home today, and he insists he needs the room to himself. Something about writing something for Chris." He rolls his eyes. "Hopeless romantic."

Neil glances toward Todd, instinctively seeking him out. Todd's gaze flickers away, quick, nervous, his hands folding in his lap as though he can make himself smaller, invisible.

"Well, we were…" Neil begins, the words stumbling out before catching in his throat. His pulse thrums uncomfortably loud in his ears. "We were kind of in the middle of something, Cameron."

Cameron doesn't seem to notice the strain in Neil's voice. He folds his arms, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, every inch of him restless and impatient.

"Come on, Neil. Just one night. I just need some peace."

Neil hesitates. His mouth opens, then closes again. He can feel Todd beside him, silent, still, and it makes every decision harder. Finally, he exhales and forces a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"Uh… well, I suppose—"

"Good, so you'll do it?" Cameron cuts in before he can finish, seizing the smallest hint of agreement like a lifeline. He steps further into the room, all boyish enthusiasm now. "Thank you, Neil. I'll pay you back, I promise."

He turns his attention to Todd, practically buzzing with relief. "Todd, hope you like quizzing people. I want to ace the Chem quiz. Charlie told me to go die if I asked him again, but you care about grades, right?"

Todd's shoulders shrug slightly in response. He still won't meet Neil's eyes. "Sure," he mutters, the word small and resigned.

"Perfect!" Cameron beams, already halfway out the door. "I'll go grab my stuff. You're the best, Neil. I swear, I owe you one."

The door swings shut behind him with a hollow thud, leaving a

silence that feels far too loud.

Pfft.

Owes him.

Cameron doesn't even know the half of it.

Neil risks a glance back at Todd. His chest aches.

Damn it. He knows the moment has slipped through their fingers.

He can already see Todd folding back in on himself, retreating into that quiet spiral of doubt.

If they were alone, really alone, Neil would have pulled him in again, kissed those fears away, told him how much he loves him.

But Cameron could return any second. Instead, he chances reaching quickly for Todd's hand.

A gentle squeeze.

A promise.

Todd finally lifts those eyes to him, wide and frightened and so unbearably beautiful, Neil almost growls with the frustration of it. He wants to punch something.

Maybe Cameron for barging in and splitting them apart.

Though he supposes that isn't fair.

But then Todd allows their fingers to interlace and offers him a sad half smile, Neil returns it.

"You wanna come to the rehearsal on Thursday?" Neil asks softly. "It's the last one before the practice performance with the elementary school."

He tries to sound casual, but there's an unmistakable note of hope beneath his words. He *wants* Todd there, needs him there, to see him again in his element, to remind himself why any of it matters.

"Gloria seemed to take a shine to you," he adds quickly, before Todd can protest. "And Nancy didn't seem to mind you hanging around either."

Todd's mouth lifts, hesitant at first, then spreads into a real smile, unguarded, radiant.

"Y-yeah," he says, his voice quiet but sure. "Of course. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Neil strokes his palm with his thumb for another few seconds before forcing himself to stand and let him go.

"You gonna be okay with Cameron?"

"Yeah," Todd says with a faint chuckle. "He's not so bad. And I could… get some studying in."

"You're a saint, Todd Anderson."

That earns a real laugh, bright and full, and Neil can't help but join in. For a moment, it's just the two of them, the world briefly lighter for it.

The door bangs open again. Cameron reappears, arms overflowing, a pair of pajamas teetering on top of what looks like every textbook he owns. The sight is too much. Todd and Neil collapse into laughter all over again, helpless.

"What's so funny?" Cameron grumbles, juggling the stack against his chest.

But they can barely hear him.

When Neil finally leaves the dorm to head for Charlie's, he glances back. Todd's watching him, that gentle smile still lingering, soft, lovely, full of something unspoken.

Neil smiles back.

They'll have another chance, he tells himself as he walks down the quiet hall.

Soon.

They'll get to have this.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorrrryyyyy I still got some slow burn in me.

Hope you enjoyed this one, it was one of my faves so far.

Chapter 24: Chapter 24.

Chapter Summary

Back to sweetie baby Todd, and his reflections. (Again just pretend the poem is revolutionary, I tried by best but I'm no Todd Anderson).

Chapter Notes

Hey folks, VERY sorry this chapter took a lot more time than expected. I'm basically done with quite a few of the pivotal, plot heavy chapters so have been more focused on the wider story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd.

As the Wolves tore at my skin,

Ripping me from limb to limb,

You were there, you pulled me in,

Where you end, I begin.

As I shed that lifeless form,

As my body was reborn,

Oh how you held me, kept me warm,

Stitched me up, where I was torn.

Were you mine? Was I yours?

Could we scrape by, defy their jaws?

Hide away, escape those roars,

Of each unyielding beast.

And when it comes to seize us all,

I'll be there, I'll stop your fall,

You are mine, and I am yours—

What more could we need?

When all is said, when all is done,

Between my ribs, you belong;

My very core, my evensong,

My life, my love, my only one.

You're mine forevermore.

Todd stares down at the poem.

He can't *possibly* read this tonight.

He'd promised the Poets he would bring something to the meeting. He'd even felt ready for it…. excited, almost. Nervous, yes, but not paralysed. After all, he's managed a few readings in class now. He's proved to himself that he can. And besides, they've all been well received.

He suspects his friends exaggerate their praise, but even so… it means something.

It's strange, being seen like that.

Strange, but, if he's honest, *wonderfully* so.

It's refreshing. After all those years of his voice never seeming to be

heard, no matter how hard he tried.

He remembers, long ago, kindergarten, maybe, coming home clutching a stack of paper. He remembers buzzing with excitement over what he'd written, desperate to show his parents.

His teacher, Miss Bates, had assigned the class their very first creative writing piece. "*Write about anything you love*," she'd said.

Todd had chosen his parents.

They'd never been particularly affectionate, Todd rarely got hugs or kisses, but he didn't mind. His room was his sanctuary, and he admired them all the same.

They always looked so pristine, hosting glamorous parties downstairs (none of which he was ever invited to, of course).

They were social, charming, the kind of people everyone seemed to like.

Jeffrey, of course, was the same.

Todd couldn't wait to grow up and be like them, to wear smart clothes, to be called handsome and distinguished, to finally be the kind of son they could be proud of.

It must've been there in his blood somehow. One day they'd notice. They'd pull him in and tell him how much they loved him.

Perhaps, this piece of work, this blatant admiration of his family, would do just that. Would show them he was a good kid.

So that night, he'd read his poem at the dinner table. It wasn't much, simple words about how perfect his family was and how much he wanted to be like them someday. He stuttered a little, but he was proud.

His father had listened, stone-faced, until about midway through. Then, without a word, he stood, walked into his office, and closed the door.

Todd had stopped reading. Waited for him to come back.

"Was that it, dear?" His mother had murmured, not looking up from

her magazine she was leafing through.

"*Mommy, I'm waiting for Daddy to come back. I'm not finished yet. He needs to hear the end,*" he'd said, voice small.

"*Oh, your father's in his office,*" she'd replied absently, turning a page. "*He's been very stressed at work. He's an important man at the firm, you know. He'll probably be there the rest of the night*."

A pause.

"*That was very nice, dear.*" She couldn't have sounded less interested if she tried. She probably didn't even hear a word he said.

It had hurt more than he'd ever admit. He'd written it for *them*. He'd thought they'd be pleased.

They were always so happy when *Jeffrey* brought something home from school, why not him?

Why did they refuse to love him? Why did they refuse to acknowledge his existence?

What had he done wrong?

He'd excused himself from the table. His mother hadn't even deemed to look up at him.

That night, he'd cried quietly under the covers, the torn pieces of the poem clutched in his fist. It obviously hadn't meant anything to them. He'd decided, then, that maybe *he* didn't have anything worth saying.

And yet, here he is now.

With people who actually *want* to listen.

It's more than he ever expected.

Friends who applaud him when he speaks.

A teacher who believes in him more than any adult has before.

At last Todd has started to think that maybe, just maybe, there's value in what he feels. Value in what he says.

Maybe there's value in *him*.

Still… *this* poem.

This poem feels too raw. Too exposing. A kind of confession.

He hadn't meant for it to become this yearning, lovesick thing. It was supposed to be about freedom, about shedding the meek skin he once wore, the one that masked his true self. The self he'd spent years burying, trapped inside a body that never quite felt like home.

For so long, it felt as though he were being hunted.

As though there were always a target on his back. If anyone looked too closely, they'd see the truth… see *him*.

A degenerate, a freak of nature.

No matter how deep he buried it, how carefully he covered it up, how many words he used to deflect and deny…

He was destined, it seemed, to be found out.

To be torn apart.

Engulfed by teeth that would rip him into a thousand pieces, mind, body, and soul devoured by cruelty.

Always a burden.

Never something to be cherished.

Never something to be loved.

Destined to walk alone.

To never know love in the way others did.

But now…

Now he feels, perhaps naïvely, that he will never walk alone again.

Now he feels *free*.

Free from the shackles that once bound him, that once kept him small, voiceless, unseen.

Now completely, wholly, entirely free.

But the story of that freedom, the reason for it… that's all Neil.

All *him*.

And so, the poem changed.

It became something else.

Something truer.

Something raw.

It became about Neil, his beautiful boy, who brought him back to life.

Who *freed* him.

Who Todd so desperately wanted to free in return.

For them both to escape the inevitability of their suffering.

To finally, finally, be *alive*.

Keating, of course, had *loved* it when Todd nervously brought the poem to him during office hours, just the previous evening.

He'd smiled that wide, disarming smile and said, "*My boy, you're really getting into your stride as a writer. I am truly proud, Todd*."

Naturally, Todd had turned scarlet, mumbling something about it being too simple, too sentimental.

But Keating, ever unrelenting in his belief, had just clapped him on the back and declared,

"*Love is never too sentimental, Mr. Anderson. Let it wash all over you. Let yourself be sentimental, boy. It's not a thing to be ashamed of.*" His eyes had twinkled with that familiar warmth.

And that was it, wasn't it? That was what it all came down to.

Love.

Love.

He's in *love*…and boy, does Todd *know* it.

He thinks of last week. Of how sweetly Neil had spoken to him, his voice gentle but sure. How his protective nature had shone through in every word. How his affection had glowed from his eyes like sunlight breaking through storm clouds.

He thinks of how Neil's lips had parted as they'd leaned closer, how tenderly he'd cradled Todd's jaw, like he was something fragile, something holy to behold.

Something to *worship*.

He remembers the breath between them, warm, charged, impossible, and how it had felt like they were about to take flight.

Then Cameron's interruption. The loss in Neil's eyes as he'd stepped away. The hush that followed.

And ever since, the glances, charged and unspoken. Neil's fingers brushing his under the table, lingering a heartbeat too long. The quiet ways they reached for each other when no one else was watching.

Todd had always *hoped* Neil might feel something for him, somewhere deep down where hope was dangerous. But that moment, when Neil leaned in, eyes bright and unguarded, every ounce of affection laid bare—

God, what had he ever done to deserve that look? The promise of those lips, so close he could almost taste them.

He still can't breathe when he remembers it.

But they still haven't *talked* about it.

They haven't had the chance.

They've barely had a moment alone since that evening.

The play has swallowed Neil whole these past few days, rehearsals every night, the director relentless.

Yet Todd's never seen him so locked in. So focused. So passionate. So deeply motivated.

So entirely *alive*.

He's there now. After all, it's the eve of opening night. Nearly the big show.

Nearly Neil's moment.

Todd couldn't be more excited (*or more restless*), if he tried.

At the last rehearsal Todd had been allowed to attend, Neil had been *radiant*. Alive in a way that made Todd's chest ache. And when their eyes met across the stage lights, Neil had looked at him so openly, so beautifully, a quiet affection shining through that felt meant for no one else.

A barely visible wink, a secret promise in those dark, sparkling eyes.

Todd still can't quite believe those eyes are his.

For him.

For Todd.

Sometimes he thinks it must be a dream.

And if it is…

…he never wants to wake.

He desperately wants to stay under this spell forever.

The one Neil cast the day they met, when their hands touched for the first time and something electric leapt through him.

He'd felt from that very moment, from the first time he saw those perfect eyes, that gorgeous grin, that he was utterly fucked.

All that time trying to conceal this.

Trying to run from the energy that seems to always float between them.

All the time making sure he averted his gazes.

But now… he doesn't want to hide anything.

It's still scary of course. Still risky. But maybe it's worth that risk. Worth every fear that wracks through his body at the thought of facing who he really is.

Facing that he loves *another boy*.

But to get to have Neil, even once. Just for a brief lapse of time. *Any lapse of time*. That would be worth everything.

Neil *saved him*. In every way that matters. Todd wants to be wholly his.

And maybe, just maybe, soon he will get to be.

His heart does somersaults at the thought.

The world feels still, almost sacred, his heart still racing with the idea of Neil—

But a knock at the dorm door breaks his trance. Sharp.

Unexpected.

Odd. The Poets never knock anymore (*that's half the problem*), so it must be someone else.

But who else would come here?

A faculty member maybe? Nolan?

Seems unlikely.

"It's open," Todd calls, turning in his chair.

The door swings wide.

And there he is, framed by the corridor light like a bad omen, a curse, a phantom.

Mr. Perry.

Todd stands instantly, heart jolting into his throat, but he's immediately brushed off with a sharp wave of the man's hand.

"Keep your seat, boy. No need to pander to me." The man scoffs.

He seems angry, though perhaps that's just his default.

In the few brief encounters Todd has had with him, he's never seen him smile. Not even a hint of one.

Todd sinks back down, palms clammy against his knees.

Crap. Neil's at rehearsal. He's not due back for at least another hour… probably more, considering it's the eve of the play.

"Uh… Mr. Perry, Neil… he's—"

He stumbles over this words, wracking his brain for what excuse he can possibly think up for Neil right there on the spot. But it's no use.

"No need to try to cover for my son, Mr. Anderson. He's been caught." Mr. Perry interrupts, glumly.

Todd feels the blood rush to his face, his heart pounding so hard he can hear it in his ears. *Caught?* It can't be. How could he possibly—

"Do you know when he'll be back?" Mr. Perry's tone is sharp, glass sharp, unyielding.

"Uh… it varies," Todd manages, forcing a nervous smile that doesn't reach his eyes. He tries for ignorance, but Mr. Perry isn't a man with patience for ambiguity.

The fist slamming against the desk makes Todd flinch. "Goddamn it. Just give me any window of time, Mr. Anderson."

The venom in his voice sends a chill down Todd's spine. If he's this openly hostile with *him,* a near stranger, how's he going to treat Neil once he gets back?

Todd hesitates, throat tight. His eyes flick toward the door, half-hoping, half-fearing that Neil might walk through it at any second. He doesn't want to tell Mr. Perry anything. Every instinct screams to protect Neil, to lie, to deflect, but he can tell from Mr. Perry's expression that it's useless. The man would wait here all night if he had to.

"Usually about an hour's time, probably even longer." Todd says finally, defeated.

Mr. Perry nods, settling himself as though he owns the room. His eyes flick toward Neil's bed, to the photographs and scattered scripts on his desk.

"They certainly have him cutting into his meal times, don't they?"

"Uh… oh… well, sure. They don't usually mind down at the kitchen," Todd stammers, trying to fill the silence. Trying to spin this positively

somehow. “They really like Neil and—”

“There’s no need to stand up for him. This is inexcusable.” Mr. Perry cuts in again, voice sharp as a blade. “You’d do well to hold your tongue, boy.”

Todd flinches. The words sting, but he swallows them down. He wishes… *God,* he wishes, he could stand up to this man, could tell him what his cruelty has *done*.

How much it’s breaking Neil.

But he knows anything he says could only make it worse.

He needs to *warn* Neil. Somehow.

“Um, sir… I need to get to a—” he catches himself before saying too much, “A study group… soon.”

He prays the excuse will be enough to get him out of there, to give him even a few minutes’ head start to find Neil before it’s too late.

But Mr. Perry just leans back in his chair, crossing his arms.

“By all means, son. Be on your way.” He glances toward the door, his mouth twisting into something Todd can only describe as smug. “I’ll be waiting for him.”

As soon as Todd slips into the corridor, the sheer panic surges through him.

There’s no way they’ll let him into rehearsal, not today. It’s the final dress run, the one where no one’s allowed to interrupt. No pausing. No distractions.

He can’t just burst into Henley Hall and drag Neil away… but he also can’t just wait outside and do nothing. Mr. Perry will be waiting to ambush him, Todd can *feel* it, and the thought makes his stomach twist.

Unsure what else to do, he bolts across the hallway and bursts into Charlie and Cameron’s room.

Relief floods him when he finds only Charlie there, lounging back on his bed, tapping a pencil against a notebook.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, Todd?” Charlie

grins his usual grin, but the moment he gets a proper look at Todd's face, his smile falters. He sits up straight, discarding his notebook. "Hey, what's up?"

Todd shuts the door quickly, lowering his voice. "Mr. Perry's in our room. He—he knows about the play."

Charlie curses under his breath, scanning the room as though searching for an idea he can grab out of thin air.

"What do we *do*, Charlie? He's gonna ambush him. There's no way he'll let him go onstage, and Neil's worked so hard."

Charlie is uncharacteristically quiet as he seems to silently ponder the issue. He looks unbelievably conflicted, half-angry, half-defeated. After a moment, a solemn look crosses his face. He pats the bed beside him, motioning for Todd to sit. Todd does so, heart hammering.

"Look," Charlie says, rubbing a hand over his face, "I don't like it any more than you do. But he was gonna find out sooner or later, wasn't he?"

Todd nods miserably. He'd known, deep down, that this day would come, that once the rave reviews hit the *Welton Times*, there'd be no hiding it.

Neil would be the talk of the school. He was so incredible in rehearsals alone, that Todd was sure his name would be plastered all over town after tomorrow night.

Neil had known too, of course, that his father would find out one day. Todd wasn't entirely sure how he'd planned to deal with it. They'd just focused on seizing the day, on doing exactly what Neil wanted, for once in his life. Being selfish. Being free.

For once, Neil wasn't a shadow of his parents' expectations. He was following his own passions.

Todd had worried, even protested at first, but now he understood why it had to happen this way. There was no way Mr. Perry would've given permission in the first place. So it had to be in secret.

So yes… Mr. Perry was bound to find out. They'd accepted that. But they'd always assumed it would be *after* the play. When it was too late to stop Neil from doing this.

Not like *this*.

Not when Neil was so close to finally having what he wanted.

This was the worst-case scenario.

“What if he doesn’t let him do it?” Todd asks quietly.

Charlie sighs. “Then there’s not much we can do. All Neil can do is tell him the truth. He’s allowed to want what he wants.” He smirks faintly. “Isn’t that what Captain’s been drilling into us? *Carpe diem?* Mr. Perry won’t like it one bit, but maybe Neil can convince him. Maybe his grades will buy him some leeway.”

Todd studies him, surprised by the measured tone. Usually, he’d expect Charlie to start talking about setting off fireworks in Mr. Perry’s briefcase, or at the very least to storm across the hall and give him a piece of his mind. Charlie’s never exactly been one for subtlety.

He knows how deeply Charlie seems to hate Mr. Perry, how fiercely protective he is of Neil. Todd trusts that implicitly, knows Charlie would risk anything to keep Neil safe.

So perhaps he knows better than Todd just how dangerous Mr. Perry’s temper can be. Perhaps he knows too well, that intervening will only make things worse.

Still, it feels downright *awful* to just let it happen. To just sit idly by while Mr. Perry tears into Neil.

Todd can already picture how devastated Neil will be if he’s not allowed to perform, after he’s poured every fragment of himself into this role.

Todd swallows hard, forcing himself to hold onto that tiny shred of hope. That maybe Neil can talk his father down. Maybe it won’t end as badly as he fears.

Charlie watches him carefully, looking just as miserable as Todd feels.

Sometimes it seems they’re destined to spend their lives worrying about Neil, but at least they’re united in their concern.

“Are we still doing the meeting tonight?” Todd asks after a few moments, his voice quieter than he means it to be. He needs something to look forward to, something that feels *normal*. Hell, he’ll

even read the damn poem. Sentimental and entirely transparent as it is. At least it's real.

Charlie's face lights up instantly. "Hell yeah, Anderson." He claps Todd on the shoulder with that easy, infectious energy of his. "We've gotta hear one of your sappy poems at least once this week."

Todd laughs, embarrassed, ducking his head. His cheeks burn. Keating had hinted that Charlie might know about his feelings for Neil, but lately the teasing feels a little too pointed, a little too *knowing* to be coincidence.

"Oh, stop," he mutters. "At least my poems aren't pulled straight from *Playboy*."

Charlie bursts out laughing. He claps Todd on his shoulder. His usual bantering demeanour back in full swing.

"Touché, my friend."

He seems to *adore* when Todd gives it right back to him. Always a glint in his eye when Todd shows any hint of sass.

It occurs to Todd that Charlie almost wants him out of his shell as much as Neil does.

The thought makes his chest ache with gratitude, for this unexpected bond, for being allowed in, in a way he knows Charlie doesn't allow many people.

When he'd first met Charlie, he'd been nervous of him. Terrified, even.

The teasing, the boldness, that easy confidence, it was all so reminiscent of the boys at Balincrest who had laughed at him, not with him. For weeks, he'd been sure that Charlie despised him.

The quiet new kid who'd just sidled into their group; too shy, too boring, too much of a rule follower. Boys like Charlie usually ate boys like him alive.

But it hadn't taken long to see the truth.

Charlie wasn't loud or roguish out of meanness. He wasn't that way out of cruelty.

Impulsive, yes. Far too rash at times, absolutely. But never cruel.

Charlie was like a loyal dog, playful, loud, endlessly entertaining, but beneath it all, steadfast and kind. He'd risk himself for the people he loved, every single time.

Even for Todd.

He thinks of the way Charlie had stood up for him to Max, how he'd silenced the cruel words, done what no one else ever had before.

Besides Neil and Keating, Charlie is probably the only person in the world who's ever truly *seen* him. Who likes him for who he is.

They share a short laugh, a brief, fragile reprieve from the tension still twisting Todd's chest.

Then Charlie leans back, his grin softening. "Don't worry too much, Todd. We'll make sure Neil gets to do that play. Between us and Keating, we'll find a way."

Todd hopes that's true. He really does.

But he can't shake the feeling that this isn't going to end well.

The thought of Neil being stopped, of him not being able to live out his dream at last, makes something tighten painfully in his chest.

He *has* to be in the show. No matter the cost.

Todd stays in Charlie's room until it's time to head to the dining hall. They haven't heard Neil come in yet, so Todd's guess that rehearsal would run late was correct.

The two of them walk side by side down the corridor, their usual banter muted. A quiet worry presses down on them both, unspoken but heavy, until they catch sight of the other Poets gathered ahead.

As soon as they do, they slip back into their rhythm. Laughing, chattering, teasing Knox about whatever lovesick drivel he's written for Chris this week. Charlie musses up Cameron's hair, ignoring his loud protests, while Meeks scolds them all for not taking his latest tutoring session seriously enough.

For a moment, it almost feels normal.

But even surrounded by laughter, by the easy noise of his friends, Todd's thoughts won't leave Neil. They stay fixed on him, on what's waiting for him back in their room.

As Nolan leads them in saying Grace, Todd bows his head as usual, but he doesn’t pray for the meal.

He prays for Neil.

Prays that he'll get through this.

Prays that the poor boy won't be pulled further into Tom's clutches.

Prays that he’ll defy those jaws.

Prays that they *both* will.

Chapter End Notes

> We’re getting into canon compliant territory soon but pleaseeee do not fear, this is a fix-it (promise).

Chapter 25: Chapter 25.

Chapter Notes

> Folks!!! I'm sorry this took so long to get to you. Not to be all typical AO3 disclaimer on you but damn some crazy irl shit happened and then this chapter became impossibly long and I spent so long editing it.
>
> We're currently in canon (I'm so sorry) but please know I will not hurt a hair on my little baby Neil's head. That's a promise x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil.

The stage at Henley Hall hums with leftover laughter and motion.

Everyone is beyond excitement.

Beyond anticipation.

They've just finished their last official rehearsal and it could not have gone better if Neil had dreamed it up.

As a result, they're all in a ridiculously good mood.

Even the stage hands are joining the animated chatter, high fiving and cheering just as much as everyone else.

This is all of their victory after all.

They've all worked non stop and are overjoyed to see it paying off.

Nancy's voice cuts through the noise. She herself remains her serious, stoic self, but Neil can tell she's just as hyped up as the rest of them are.

This show is her baby after all.

"Okay, everybody, gather round, please!"

The cast gathers, still buzzing with the kind of energy that only comes at the end of a truly good run.

And oh boy, has it been a good run.

Neil is beaming, practically hopping from foot to foot on pure adrenaline.

He can't believe how close they are to opening night.

He can almost taste it.

Tomorrow night.

Tomorrow, they'll perform it for real. In front of a full live audience.

The thought sends a rush through him, equal parts thrill and terror.

Tomorrow night, Puck will come to life.

Neil will breathe air into him, step fully inside his skin for good.

He'll fulfil a destiny he's carried deep in his bones since that first day he played pretend with his mom as a child.

Since the first day he realised performing lit him from within.

At last, he'll achieve something beyond grades, beyond family pride.

Beyond pure expectation.

He'll finally outrun the prophecy that would have left him miserable and alone, trapped in medical school, crying into patient charts.

There's no going back now.

This is the first step toward his freedom.

Toward salvation.

Tomorrow, his friends will see him as his truest form at last.

He hopes he'll make them proud.

Hopes he'll make the Captain proud.

Hopes he'll make *himself* proud for once.

Today has been their most exhilarating rehearsal yet.

They've run the whole show before, of course, but tonight, the air

feels different.

Charged.

That first test performance, though, for the elementary school, well, that had carried its own kind of joy.

Watching a sea of young faces light up, seeing even a few of them truly captivated by the magic that they'd made, it had felt almost sacred.

One boy in the front row had reminded Neil of himself at that age: bright-eyed, leaning forward, completely enraptured by the show.

While others fidgeted with marbles or whispered to their neighbours, this one boy seemed to drink in every word, tracing the rhythm of each line, as if he understood it all.

Neil couldn't help but smile at him between scenes. First- to fifth-graders weren't exactly the most devoted audience, but having just one person so utterly enchanted, that was enough.

When the performance had concluded, that same boy had leapt to his feet, cheering louder than anyone as Neil took his bow.

And later, during the Q&A Nancy had held, he'd stood up again, hands trembling, voice quivering and asked Neil outright, "*What are your tips for getting into acting? I wanna do just what you do one day*."

The question had hit Neil right in the heart.

To think that he could inspire someone, to think he might've sparked the same fire that had once been smothered inside of him, that he'd once needed to keep concealed.

It was almost enough to make him cry.

Instead, he'd grinned and answered earnestly, telling the young boy all the reasons he loved acting.

He'd shared the tips Nancy had given him on his first day, even confessed how he'd tripped during blocking and forgotten his lines.

Had emphasised that the mistakes he had made during rehearsals were oftentimes the moments of which he had learned the most from.

The kid had listened with a fierce concentration, scribbling everything

into his little notepad, as though Neil's words were gospel.

He found that talking to those kids had come so naturally.

Maybe even more naturally than performing itself.

There was something freeing about it, about sharing what he loved without fear of judgment.

Maybe one day, he could even teach… if being on stage ever ran dry.

Wow, he'd thought, laughing a little to himself, *Keating really has done a number on me, hasn't he?*

But he's glad for it.

Glad he finally has some semblance of hope for what comes next.

Something aside from that crippling dread that always grips him everytime he looks at that Harvard application sitting on his desk.

For the first time since he was a child, Neil actually feels *excited* about the future.

He just needs to make it through one more academic year, get into college, and then…

Then maybe he'll finally have a chance to be free.

To carve his own path.

It's an exhilarating thought, one that would've felt impossible only months ago.

But thanks to the Captain, thanks to the Dead Poets Society, thanks to *Todd*… the future feels bright.

He's finally paddling in shallow waters instead of drowning under the current.

He can do this.

He will make it through.

Just one more night, and the play will be done, and then…

Then there'll be no stopping him.

His father is going to go ballistic when he finds out, of course.

Neil's no fool, he knows that day's coming eventually.

But by then, hopefully, there'll be glowing reviews. Maybe even something to frame him as being "*Harvard material*."

It's optimistic, sure, but it's the only card he's got.

Now, as the cast gathers around Nancy, the air still humming with post-rehearsal energy, Ginny Danburry appears at Neil's side, eyes bright and curls bouncing.

"I can't believe it's tomorrow!" she squeals, grabbing his shoulder with both hands and giving him a dramatic shake.

Her bracelets jingle as she does it, catching the light from the stage.

Neil laughs, steadying himself and shaking her right back. "Believe it," he teases.

"Tomorrow night, you get to be a real fairy, wings and all."

She gasps, clutching her chest in mock offense. "Excuse me, I am a real fairy. This, she gestures down at her glitter-covered costume, "is just my mortal disguise."

Neil grins and they dissolve into shared laughter.

Moments like this make all the late nights and endless line runs worth it.

Then Ginny's expression shifts, a mischievous spark flickering in her eyes.

"So… tomorrow night," she says, leaning in conspiratorially. "Which of your *cute* friends are coming?"

Neil lets out a startled laugh.

Of course she'd ask that.

The girl is too predictable.

He pretends to ponder, though he already knows.

As much as he loves his fellow Dead Poets, none of them are exactly

fit for his stage best friend.

“Honestly? None of my friends are right for you.” He says honestly.

Ginny raises an eyebrow, the corners of her mouth twitching. She’s not letting him off that easily.

“Oh really?”

Neil sighs in mock defeat and starts ticking them off on his fingers.

“Knox. That boy has it too bad for… uh, a certain girl… to even notice another girl’s existence.”

He hesitates just slightly before saying it, choosing his words carefully. Ginny might be one of his closest friends here, but she’s also Chet’s little sister and Knox’s hopeless devotion to Chris isn’t exactly a secret he wants spilling through the Henley Hall grapevine.

Still, she seems to get it. Her brows lift in recognition, a sly smile tugging at her mouth before she rolls her eyes and lets out a theatrical huff.

“Ugh, tragic.”

Neil laughs, the sound of it bubbling out of him before he can stop it. He swats at her arm playfully, shaking his head. “You’re impossible.”

“What about that cutie… uh, Charlie Dalton?” Ginny teases, mischief sparking in her eyes. “Marnie told me he’s a *real* charmer.”

Neil groans, laughing under his breath.

As if *Charlie* could ever be described as a charmer.

His best friend, whose sense of humour consisted mainly of fart jokes and endless talk about boobs.

Besides, the boy is far too impulsive.

Far too rebellious.

Too spontaneous to even consider settling for one girl.

Sweet little Ginny wouldn’t stand a chance.

“Charlie would probably eat you alive,” he snorts.

Ginny gasps in mock offense and swats at him again, but Neil ducks just in time. They both break into laughter.

“Seriously, Ginny. Charlie would probably *lick* you all over sooner than he’d even kiss you.” He laughs at her horrified expression.

“Disgusting,” she fires back, wrinkling her nose. “Anyone else?” she asks eagerly, bouncing a little on her heels.

Neil smiles, pretending to think, though the grin tugging at his mouth already gives him away.

He pictures his most serious friend next: Richard Cameron. He chuckles at just the thought of him pursuing someone romantically.

His perfectly parted hair, blazer pressed within an inch of its life, the permanent furrow between his brows, acting like a forty-five-year-old divorcee already.

Not exactly suave, but perhaps someone out there would find the whole model-student thing charming.

“Ah, there is Cameron,” Neil says at last, snapping his fingers. “Ginger guy. He came by that time to pick me up, remember?”

Ginny’s nose wrinkles instantly, like she’s just bitten into a lemon.

“I’d rather chew on glass,” she declares, shuddering so dramatically it makes Neil bark out a laugh.

Ouch. Poor Cameron.

The artsy types were never really his crowd anyway.

Maybe one day a cute accountant will catch his eye.

Neil presses a hand to his mouth, trying to compose himself before continuing.

“All right, all right… Pitts and Meeks...”

It’s typical to think of those two as a hive mind.

He rarely sees one without the other. Neither has shown any real interest in girls; they both looked like they’d seen a ghost the first time Charlie brought some to a Dead Poets meeting.

He titters at the thought of either of them meeting Ginny.

She might seem shy and sweet, but there's a wicked streak under there, and he's not sure they'd survive it.

"Well, they probably wouldn't know a girl if she hit them in the face," he says, grinning wider, not cruelly, just honest.

Ginny bursts into laughter, clapping her hands together in delight.

"Oh, Neil, you're *horrible*," she manages through her giggles, doubling over as Neil just beams, proud of himself for landing the punchline.

"Nah, they're great," he adds quickly, feeling the need to defend his boys. "Just… not for you."

Ginny rolls her eyes, still grinning. Then that grin sharpens, mischievous.

"Well… that leaves one more."

Neil nearly stumbles, which only makes her grin widen.

The thought of the last name on that list makes something prickle in his chest. A warmth and a nervous flutter all at once.

He can picture him so easily: the soft blonde hair that never quite sits still, in spite of how hard he tries.

Those wide, uncertain blue eyes, that pierce into Neil's soul each time they look at him.

Beautiful.

Painful.

That shy half-smile that could undo him if he let it.

The kind of face that made girls whisper, though Todd would never believe it if he heard.

A few of Neil's friends in the cast had mentioned Todd once or twice, after he'd attended rehearsals.

Telling him how cute his blonde friend was.

Asking if he had a girlfriend.

Asking what his type was.

Neil had only half-seriously contemplated killing them.

“Ah—*Todd*.”

Neil hesitates, a beat too long; the slip is almost involuntary, an unguarded thought escaping.

Ginny tilts her head, catching it. “*Well*?”

“Well, I’d hit *you* in the face if you tried anything on with him.” He tries for casual, jokey, but the smile that comes with it is softer than he intends.

Too honest.

Too *fond*.

Ginny’s brows shoot up, her smile melting into a smirk. “Oh, would you now?”

The heat rises in Neil’d cheeks.

God, why is he so ridiculously transparent?

“You know… because he’s like a brother to me,” he mumbles quickly. Hoping he doesn’t sound as unconvincing as he feels.

“Hmm. Sure, sure.”

Her tone is teasing, but her look is knowing.

Yet she doesn’t push.

She merely smiles, amused but not unkind.

Something in that quiet understanding makes Neil’s throat tighten.

It’s both a relief and a little too exposing.

She seems to see right through him.

With most people, if they ever suspected he felt anything more than friendship for Todd, they’d cast him out, call him names, worse.

Maybe even *hurt* him.

But Ginny… she just knows.

Or at least suspects.

And the most she does is give him that pointed little look, the same one she'd probably give if he'd confessed to liking a girl.

It makes him feel almost *normal*.

Like he's allowed to just be a teenager with a crush like everyone else.

Like he's not a freak show.

But it still feels too revealing talking about Todd for this long.

So he clears his throat, moving on swiftly.

Dwelling too much feels overwhelming.

"I, uh… I don't think any of them are mature enough for you, Gin." He concludes.

Ginny pouts dramatically, back in her element.

"Oh, you *spoilsport*! How else am I meant to find eligible bachelors around here?"

As she says it, she puts on a kind of 'Southern Belle' accent. It's not half bad actually and Neil shakes his head, grinning.

He watches her whirl around in a dramatic manner.

Putting on a full damsel in distress act.

Damn, that girl really *was* born for the stage.

"Perhaps Chet has some friends," Neil offers.

He isn't serious of course, Chet's friends are hardly Bachelor of the Year material, and he doubts the guy would want his kid sister dating any of them.

Ginny clearly agrees, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"Oh, ha ha," she shoots back. "As if I'd be caught dead near those *meatheads*."

Before Neil can quip back, Nancy claps her hands again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, settle down. We need to focus.”

Ginny and Neil turn their attention back to their director.

“You’re all free to go for today, but I’d really like you to read over your lines tonight.”

She pauses, scanning the semicircle of flushed, excited faces, making sure every eye is on her before continuing.

“But tomorrow morning, no peeking at them,” she warns lightly, one brow raised.

“Just come ready for our final rehearsal at four p.m. We’ll do one last run-through. No costumes, I just to make sure we’re all on our marks. I want everything clean.”

Her gaze moves over them one by one, a teacher’s mix of pride and exhaustion softening her usually sharp expression.

“I’m very proud of all of you,” she says finally, and the room feels still for a heartbeat. It’s an earnestness they rarely get from Nancy. She’s never harsh, never critical, but tends to lead with perfectionism, rather than being complimentary.

“You’ve all worked so incredibly hard.”

Then her eyes land on Neil.

“But I’d like to give a special shout-out to Neil Perry.”

Neil freezes where he stands.

The room erupts into good-natured whoops and whistles, and his face floods with heat.

He ducks his head, smiling in spite of himself as Lizzy gives him a shove to the shoulder and Ginny calls out something teasing.

“It’s just unbelievable,” Nancy goes on, her tone warm and sure, “that this young man has never acted in his life. From the moment he auditioned, I knew there was no one else who could play Puck the way he could.”

The words hit Neil like sunlight; sudden, blinding, and beautiful.

For a second, all he can do is stand there, soaking it in.

It feels almost miraculous.

If Keating hadn't taught that one Shakespeare lesson, hadn't shown them how those ancient words could sing, could live, Neil would never have dared to audition.

If Keating hadn't looked him straight in the eye and told him to seize the day, he wouldn't be standing here now.

Henley Hall had always done productions.

Last year, it had been *Romeo and Juliet*.

He remembers sneaking into the back row, clutching the program like contraband, wishing with everything in him that he could be part of that world.

Back then it had seemed impossible, something reserved for braver, freer souls than he.

But then came Keating.

His Captain.

The man who'd made him believe life could be more than simply following orders.

So this year, he'd taken the chance.

He'd auditioned for the ensemble, expecting nothing more than a background part, maybe a leaf-mover, maybe someone to hold the scenery steady.

Anything would have done.

But Nancy had seen something in him.

She'd called him back.

He hadn't even told Todd or any of the others about the follow-up auditions.

He'd been afraid they'd tell him to confess to his father right away.

So he'd kept it secret, until the day she offered him Puck.

And that night, he'd wanted to shout it from the rooftops.

So he had.

Nancy smiles at him now, her eyes crinkling.

“It’s tradition, Neil, on the eve of the play, to recognize one of our actors for their dedication and spirit.”

She holds out a small certificate. The rest of the cast erupt into cheers and applause.

Neil feels a lump rise in his throat as he takes it, almost embarrassed by how much it means to him.

He steps forward and hugs Nancy quickly, something he never would’ve dared weeks ago.

She’s not a particularly affectionate woman, but she returns it gladly, whispering before they part:

“You’ve got a role for life. I’m just so happy we found you.”

He grins and thanks her, turning to the rest of the cast and crew with a grateful smile.

What he loves most about this group is that there’s no competition.

Most of them have been part of every Henley Hall production since they were kids, yet they’ve welcomed him in as though he’d always been there.

It’s bittersweet to think that after Sunday’s matinee, it’ll all be over.

This rhythm that’s become his refuge, *his purpose* will be finished.

For another year at least.

Rumour has it next year’s show might be *Much Ado About Nothing*.

The thought makes his heart leap.

A whole year to prepare.

To be Benedick.

He can hardly wait.

But not yet. First, *tomorrow*.

The next twenty minutes, Neil spends saying goodbye to the cast.

He's stopped by Gloria, who insists on asking whether she should use fuchsia or rose-petal blush for his makeup tomorrow.

He hasn't the foggiest, but "rose petal" sounds nicer, so he says that one and she calls him a visionary for it.

He laughs all the way down the corridor.

She's a sweet old lady. He hopes she'll be the makeup artist for the next production, too.

By the time he catches the bus home, he's buzzing with excitement.

He feels eager to tell Todd everything.

About Nancy's praise, about the little certificate, about how right all of this feels.

How much it feels like home.

And, of course, he thinks of Todd himself. As he often inevitably does.

The thought of him makes his chest ache, soft and full.

To think that just over a week ago, they almost kissed.

Fuck. They almost kissed.

He almost got to live out the fantasy that's been looping through his head since the fall.

Since he first saw that perfect boy.

They haven't had another moment like that since, they haven't had a quiet moment to talk about it.

Not with finals and rehearsals keeping them both up until late into the night. Sat in their dorm, stuck into giant textbooks, practically ripping their own hair out.

Every afternoon he can get away, Neil has been in rehearsals, or practicing lines.

But despite how desperately he just wants them to let it all out.

To just fucking *kiss* Todd, finally.

He feels that now … there isn't a rush.

Because he knows now, it *will* happen.

And soon.

If the play weren't tomorrow, he might've tried again tonight.

But he's jittery enough preparing for Puck without adding *those* kind of nerves on top of it.

Still… he can *touch* him.

He can linger.

He can rest a hand on his arm a second too long, and know it'll be welcomed.

Maybe Todd can help him go over his lines tonight.

They could sit side by side, shoulders brushing, hands finding each other in the quiet.

His heart melts at the thought and he smiles all the way back.

When he arrives at Welton, he knows he's too late for dinner with the others.

The bell will ring soon, and he'll have just missed it.

Usually, he likes to shower and change after rehearsals, run through his monologue under the steam, then eat once he's dressed and decompressed.

The kitchen staff always save him something.

They're good to him, maybe because he volunteered with them while he was there for summer school.

As Neil climbs the dormitory stairs, the bell rings overhead, and the corridors erupt into chaos.

Boys thunder past him, laughing, jostling each other on their way to dinner.

He can't help but grin as he spots Meeks and Pitts among the crowd.

"Save some for me!" he calls after them, laughing, his voice light and carefree.

He continues up the staircase, muttering his lines under his breath.

The rhythm of the words feels like a heartbeat now, steady, grounding.

He changes the cadence here and there, playing with emphasis, shaping Puck's mischief and melody even as he walks.

He swings open the door to his dorm room, already planning to toss his bag down, maybe wash his face before dinner, perhaps get in a quick shower while running his lines.

But then he stops dead in his tracks.

His father is sitting at his desk.

Mr. Perry is not slouched, not even impatient.

Just sitting there, like a figure carved from marble, his hands folded neatly in his lap, his hat and coat placed with surgical precision beside him.

It's as though he's been waiting here for hours, as if this is his rightful place.

Neil freezes. His pulse slams into his ribs.

"Father," he manages, the word barely escaping his throat.

"Neil."

Mr. Perry's tone is flat, almost bored, but Neil knows that calm.

It's the worst kind.

The quiet before the explosion.

Beneath it, he can feel the tension like a drawn wire.

His mouth goes dry. There's no use pretending.

The truth hangs heavy in the air between them.

He knows.

He knows about the play.

Neil can see it in his eyes, in the rigid set of his jaw.

He opens his mouth, desperate to explain, to find some way to soften what's coming.

"Wait a minute. Before you say anything, please let me ex—"

"Don't you dare talk back to me!"

The words hit like a slap.

Mr. Perry rises slowly, the veneer of calm cracking just enough for Neil to shrink back.

"It's bad enough that you've wasted your time with this—this absurd acting business!"

Neil flinches at the pure disgust in his fathers voice. He feels twelve years old again, caught in that impossible space between shame and helplessness.

"But you deliberately deceived me!" his father goes on, voice remaining steady, but more blatant fury lies underneath. "How, how, *how* did you expect to get away with this?"

Neil's tongue feels thick.

He wants to answer truthfully, to say *because it means everything to me,* but the words stick like glue in his throat.

His silence only seems to inflame the man further.

"Answer me," Mr. Perry snaps. "Who put you up to it? Was it this new man? This—Mr. Keating?"

At the mention of Keating, something in Neil jolts back to life.

Trust his father to find someone else to blame.

He always needs a scapegoat.

Keating can't be caught in this.

He can't lose the Captain.

He'd never forgive himself.

"No. Nobody p— I thought I'd surprise you. I've gotten all A's in every class."

The lie tastes bitter the moment it leaves his mouth.

He doesn't have the heart to tell his father the real reason, that acting makes him feel alive for the first time in his life.

That he wanted, just once, to do something for himself.

But he knows that won't matter.

His parents have never cared for the arts.

They don't even like going to galleries.

"*Surprising them*" is a weak excuse, but it's the only card he can play.

The only one his father might understand.

That's how it's always been.

Everything he does is for them. Why wouldn't this be, too?

But Mr. Perry isn't buying any of it.

"Did you think I wasn't going to find out? '*Oh, my niece is in a play with your son,'* says Mrs. Marks. '*No, no, no,'* I say, *'you must be mistaken. My son's not in a play*.'"

His father's voice rises, trembling with fury now. "You made a *liar* out of me, Neil!"

There it is, the breaking point.

The mask slips, and Neil finally sees what this is about.

Not *him*.

Not the play.

Not his dreams.

It's about *image*. It's always been about image.

What others will think.

How this will look.

How *Mr. Perry* will look to others.

His chest feels tight, like there's no air left in the room.

Mr. Perry's face hardens further. "Now, tomorrow, you go to them and you tell them that you're quitting."

It's what Neil had expected, but it still feels like a shot to the heart.

It's that simple to his father: if something doesn't serve his image, it's disposable.

Neil isn't even sure why he's surprised anymore, and yet he is.

Every time.

He has to do this.

At least tomorrow night.

The understudy could take over for the rest of the weekend if it came to that.

But not the premiere.

He can't let everyone down.

Not when he's come this far.

Tears sting at his eyes before he can stop them.

This can't be the end.

He has to see it through.

He can't not do this.

It'll *kill* him.

"No, I can't," he blurts out, voice cracking. "I have the main part. The

performance is tomorrow night."

It sounds so small, even to his own ears.

Pleading never works. His father doesn't deal with the business of emotion, only control, obedience, facts.

"I don't care if the world comes to an end tomorrow night!"

The words hit like a slap. His father doesn't realise how true they are.

For Neil, the world *will* end tomorrow if he can't perform.

Maybe that sounds dramatic, but the play is everything.

It's what's kept him afloat, what's made the idea of a future bearable.

Keating, Todd, the Dead Poets, they've all saved him in their own ways.

But the play… the play gave him a glimpse of the life he could have. One with color, and laughter, and meaning.

And now, as easily as flicking a switch, his father is tearing it away.

"You are through with that play. Is that clear?" And when Neil fails to answer, he repeats it. More assertively this time.

"Is that clear?"

Mr. Perry looms closer, his voice like thunder, his glare sharp enough to flay him alive.

There's nothing more to say.

Neil has lost.

He swallows hard, forcing the sobs down before they can escape.

Showing his weakness will only make it worse.

"Yes, sir," he whispers.

Satisfied enough, Mr. Perry gives a curt nod and turns for the door. But he pauses once more, just long enough to twist the knife.

"I made a great many sacrifices to get you here, Neil, and you will not let me down."

It isn't a reminder. It's a warning.

And the worst part is, it's *true*. Mr. Perry *has* sacrificed everything. Money, time, energy. Connections.

But none of it was for *Neil*.

Not really.

It was for the version of him that only exists in his father's mind.

Neil never *asked* for Welton.

Never wanted this future.

The only thing that made coming bearable was Charlie's presence. Still, what mattered to his father always had to matter to him.

That was the rule.

There's nothing left to say.

There never is.

"No, sir."

Mr. Perry gives him one last withering look before exiting the room.

The moment the door shuts, the sound seems to echo in Neil's skull. He stands frozen for half a heartbeat.

Then his knees buckle.

He sinks to the floor and lets the sobs come, finally unrestrained.

His breath stutters in his chest, breaking against the silence.

He's never felt so small.

So trapped.

So utterly, impossibly alone.

Chapter End Notes

This was meant to be the two verbatim scenes that happen between Neil and his father and then Keating and Neil but this first bit got me carried away so I'll post Keatings pov very soon. (Tomorrow at the latest.)

Never fear we will get some more Anderperry cuteness too before we get to some of the darker plot elements.

P.S. I've started brainstorming about a modern Anderperry AU, as this one has gotten me back in my writing stride, so lmk if any of you would be interested in that once this has concluded.

Chapter 26: Chapter 26.

Chapter Notes

Aha hey, fancy seeing you again so soon….

I said this would come shortly following the last one haha.

Another verbatim conversation featuring hopeless romantic Keating as an aside.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keating.

To my darling,

My Clara — the light, the joy, the happiness of my life.

Being apart from you feels like I'm missing a lung, a rib, the better half of myself.

Keating pauses his writing smiling faintly to himself for being so sappy, so cliché.

That's the effect his wonderful woman has on him. He ponders scratching it out, taking a less hopelessly romantic tone, then leaves it after all. Clara knows John well enough that she will expect him to fawn hopelessly over her.

He practically grovels at her feet when they're together in person.

She won't expect anything less than ridiculously lovesick.

She'll tease me for it anyway, he thinks.

Laughs to himself, then presses on.

You last wrote of your concerto. Oh, how I wish I could have been there, my love. I bet you dazzled each and every person in that hall, just as you

dazzle me with your mere existence.

Your photograph lies before me, the one you sent last month. You look so beautiful in it. You always do of course, my treasure. But our months apart have only made you lovelier, and it makes the waiting all the harder to bear.

Keating glances at the photograph framed on his desk.

His Clara, playing her cello, that beautiful smile and those captivating eyes meeting his as he gazes upon her.

She is, without a doubt, the most beautiful woman he has ever known.

Why she's ever bothered with a man like him, he'll never know. But he's grateful to whatever deity blessed him with a love like hers.

She would scoff, tell him she's nothing special.

If only she could see herself the way he does.

The way he worships her.

How lovely she is.

How caring.

How kind.

I cannot believe that in just two short weeks you will be in my arms again. I think of you every day.

He pauses, picturing the moment he'll meet her off the boat. She'll run to him, of course she will. They've never much cared for hiding their devotion in public.

People probably think them improper, their public displays of affection too crude or too exuberant.

But John has never cared.

His love is his, and no one else's opinion matters.

Clara is much the same.

She cares little for convention.

She'll kiss him desperately no matter where they are.

She loves with her whole body, and he loves her just the same.

Welton is doing me well. Well — as well as it can. Given the circumstances.

He chuckles under his breath as he writes it, aware she'll read the irony between the lines. She's heard all the tales, his Welton days.

The bullying.

The teachers with a God complex.

The discipline.

The Dead Poets Society.

The solace he found in that little circle of misfits and dreamers.

He's not been able to tell her about the new recruits, of course.

Nolan still insists on vetting every letter. If Keating revealed his involvement, he'd likely be dismissed on the spot and Charlie would probably find himself in even greater trouble than he already is.

But Clara will know.

She'll read between the lines.

She always does.

She'll understand that his intent was for the next generation to carry the torch.

The boys, as you know, are my purpose. They've been surprisingly receptive

to my teachings.

Some still struggle not to only do what they're told is right — but others, oh Clara, they have so beautifully transformed.

Knowing that they might go forth with purpose, not just what their parents want, not just what the school wants, but what they want… it's beyond comprehension.

He sits back for a moment, letting the quiet hum of the dormitory settle around him.

It's late; faint chatter and laughter drift from somewhere down the corridor, and the occasional creak of floorboards reminds him that these boys are still just that, boys, caught between childhood and the vastness of the world waiting for them.

I couldn't be prouder of these free thinkers.

You'd like them all, my love.

I've written of Neil and his play, which, as I write this, opens tomorrow night. You will no doubt never hear the end of it once it is finished. The boy has talent spilling from every corner of his being.

I have no doubt he will be spectacular.

Keating pauses again, the nib of his pen hovering just above the page. He thinks of Neil then. Of the boy's remarkable growth in such a short time.

When they'd first met, just those few months ago, Neil had seemed almost consumed by the need to please: the school, his friends, his father most of all.

But even then, Keating had seen it, that spark.

The quiet authority.

The capacity for leadership that wasn't domineering but compassionate.

Neil was fair.

Gentle.

Kind beyond measure.

Always looking for ways to make life easier for the others, taking on burdens that were never his to bear.

To most, he looked effortlessly confident, strong enough to weather anything.

But Keating knew better.

The ones who appeared most composed often hid the deepest unrest.

And yet, Neil had taken his teachings to heart with such hunger, such sincerity.

He'd thrown himself into them, unafraid to chase what made him feel alive.

Carpe diem incarnate.

Keating exhales softly, a fond, wistful smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

If only every student could learn to live with such conviction. To act, finally, for themselves.

He thinks then of Todd. Of how Neil has drawn the boy gently out of his shell, and how, between them, he and Neil have coaxed out the spark that was always there.

The wisdom and sensitivity Todd has likely hidden his whole life.

Keating suspects that somewhere along the way, Todd was taught to treat his voice as unworthy, his thoughts as something best swallowed.

But lately, that has begun to change.

He's started to write.

To share.

To trust that what he has to say matters.

Keating smiles faintly at the thought.

Of all the boys, he knows Todd will be Clara's favorite.

She has a particular tenderness for the quiet ones. The ones who speak the least but feel the most.

It's something they share.

He chuckles softly, remembering how she met him: a timid young man forcing himself to read at an open-mic night for the Oxford Poetry Society.

She'd told him, years later, that she'd fallen in love with him right then, for his stubbornness, his trembling courage, his insistence on standing and speaking even when his voice shook.

And dearest Todd. His poetry grows more poignant by the day.

I feel incredibly proud every time he reads aloud, every time I witness his words come to life.

With his permission, I'll show you some when you come to Vermont. I think you'll really take to him, love.

As I indeed have, myself.

It's true. His affection for Todd runs deeper than the easy pride of a teacher watching a pupil bloom. There's something quieter there.

Something almost… protective.

Keating has never thought of himself as a paternal man.

He and Clara had long agreed: the world had enough children.

It was enough to pass their legacy in other ways.

Through words, through art, through the lives they touched.

And yet, whenever he looks at Todd, hunched slightly, as if afraid to take up space, something inside him aches.

That same instinct that drives him to reach across the desk, to coax a thought from behind the boy's silence, to remind him that what he has to say *matters*.

He's felt it even more strongly since that quiet afternoon over Thanksgiving weekend, when Todd had trusted him enough to confide what so many would never dare.

His love for Neil.

It had been moving, how, in spite of all his fear and anxiety, Todd had still come to him.

Had still chosen honesty over secrecy.

The boy had cried, trembled, shown the kind of vulnerability most men spend their lives concealing.

It was courage of a different kind… and Keating had never been prouder.

Indeed, he has never been the fatherly sort.

He's never longed for children.

But sometimes, when Todd smiles that shy, uncertain smile, Keating feels the faintest echo of what that might have been like.

Oh, how Clara will tease him for this, call him a sentimental old fool.

But she'll kiss him anyway.

She loves that soft, sentimental, part of him.

He sighs, missing her more than words can hold.

She'd have moved to Vermont with him, he knows she would have, had her father not been so unwell.

He thinks of Edward then, his dear, stubborn father-in-law.

Once, many moons ago, the man had disapproved of him entirely.

Clara's family were practically British royalty, as close to the throne as one could be, and Keating, though not poor, was hardly the sort of match Edward had imagined for his daughter.

But over time, the old man had softened. John had won him over slowly, with his patience and his good humour.

They'd become true family in the end. So much so, that when Edward's memory began to fade, when he could no longer manage even the simplest things, Clara had brought him into their home.

They'd both cared for him with endless tenderness.

Leaving the two of them had been the hardest thing John had ever done, but Clara had insisted he go, to follow his calling, to kindle in the next generation of Welton boys the same fire that still burned in him.

Even so, he knows Edward is living on borrowed time. He hopes there will be time enough to see him once more.

Keating dips his pen again, frowning slightly as he hesitates over the next line.

How is your father, my dear? Last you wrote, he was starting to forget your name. But you said music still brings him back to you — is it still helping?

Do tell him how I miss him. I love that stubborn man dearly.

Almost as much as I love his beautiful and equally stubborn daughter.

Keating smiles faintly, then underlines stubborn twice, a private joke for her amusement.

For a moment, he simply sits there, gazing at the words.

The ache of distance presses against his chest like a weight.

His eyes drift to the photograph on his desk. Clara's soft smile, the tilt of her head, the cello resting against her shoulder.

Soon, he tells himself.

Soon he can tell her everything in person. All the glorious details, all the stories that his letters can't hold.

But soon feels so far away.

He wants her here *now*, filling the room with laughter, chasing away the quiet of his solitary nights.

A knock at the door startles him out of his reverie.

“It’s open,” he calls, still bent over the desk. Footsteps cross the threshold; hesitant, then more decisive.

The door clicks softly shut.

Keating finishes the letter quickly, signing the last lines with practiced warmth.

I love you. Always remember how much. I think of you always.

Yours, forever,

John.

He sets down his pen, finally glancing up and finds Neil Perry standing before him.

He sits up a little straighter, offers the boy a smile.

“Neil. What’s up?”

Neil’s face is unreadable, almost solemn.

Not his usual sweetness.

The wide grin and bright eyes that usually light up a room are dimmed tonight.

“Can I speak to you a minute?” The words come out strained, catching slightly in his throat.

“Certainly. Sit down.”

Keating quickly folds the letter, writes Clara across the envelope, and sets it aside, a reminder to send it later tonight.

When he looks back up, he notices the state of his room and winces

inwardly.

Books piled high, loose papers scattered and Neil, awkwardly balancing a teetering stack of Wilde anthologies.

“Ah, I’m sorry…” Neil says it as if he’s the one to blame. Keating would almost laugh if not for the pallor in his face.

The boy looks… off.

“Here, let me.” Keating rises, relieves him of the burden, and sets the books aside with a reassuring smile.

As he turns back, Keating studies Neil’s face.

The boy looks rattled, not merely nervous about the play, he realises, but troubled.

Something heavier is weighing on him.

He crosses to the small table where his teapot sits cooling.

Perhaps that could offer some comfort. Keating isn’t much for Welton niceties, his version of hosting is usually a *help yourself* philosophy, but Neil is far too polite to ever do that.

“Can I get you some tea?” he asks, aware of how oddly formal it sounds even as he says it.

Neil blinks, frowning faintly as if the offer hasn’t quite registered. “Tea?” Then, after a beat, a small nod. “Sure.”

Once the tea is poured and they’ve both settled into their chairs, Neil glances around, faintly amused.

Keating realises then that the boy has never been in his office before, strangely enough, even Charlie has visited more often.

He supposes Neil’s the sort to ask his questions in class, or out on the school lawn. Never one to shy away from speaking up, never afraid to ask something that might seem foolish.

That’s precisely what makes this visit all the more worrying.

“Gosh, they don’t give you much room around here,” Neil says, almost laughing as he takes in the cramped space.

Keating smiles.

True, it's not much, certainly nothing like Nolan's office the size of a one bedroom apartment…but he's grown to like the snugness of it.

Even if it's likely the academy's subtle punishment for his "unorthodox" methods.

"No, it's part of the monastic oath," he replies lightly. "They don't want worldly things distracting me from my teaching."

They both laugh softly, sipping their tea.

Neil's gaze drifts to the framed photograph on Keating's desk. "She's pretty," he remarks.

Keating smiles, warmth flooding his features. He can tell the boy means it.

Still, there's a tentative awkwardness in the way he says it, as though unsure how such things are meant to be spoken.

Keating appreciates the sincerity nonetheless.

"She's also in London. Makes it a little difficult."

Neil lets out a short, disbelieving laugh, the kind that seems to surprise even him.

His eyes lift to Keating's, confusion flickering there.

"How can you stand it?" he asks, shaking his head slightly.

"Stand what?" Keating leans forward, half-expecting the boy means the distance from Clara. But Neil's gaze drifts elsewhere, deep in thought.

"You can go anywhere. You can do anything. How can you stand being here?"

Ah. A question of freedom.

Keating can't help but smile faintly at the honesty of it.

It's fair.

To a boy like Neil, Welton must feel like a cage.

And Keating remembers that feeling well.

The school itself holds few fond memories for him. It was the people, the friends, the words, the art, that made it bearable, that made it beautiful.

The rest, the discipline and humiliation and small cruelties, only strengthened his resolve to return and be the adult he'd once needed.

"Because I love teaching," he says simply. "I don't want to be anywhere else."

Neil studies him carefully for a long moment while Keating sips his tea.

Then, slowly, the boy's expression falters. His eyes glisten, though he blinks as if to chase it away.

Keating sets his cup down. "What's up?" he asks gently.

Neil exhales shakily. "I just talked to my father. He's making me quit the play at Henley Hall." He laughs, a thin, brittle sound, as though he's trying to make light of it.

Keating's heart sinks. He thinks of how much this play has meant to the boy.

How he's lived and breathed Puck for weeks.

How it seemed to finally allow him be *himself*.

And now that man, that rigid, unbending man, is taking it all away.

It feels too cruel for words.

His expression must be as glum as he feels, because Neil's forced smile falls.

"Acting's everything to me," Neil says, voice trembling. "But he doesn't know."

He hesitates, as though caught between guilt and the need to be honest.

"He— I can see his point. We're not a rich family like Charlie's, and we—"

It strikes Keating then that Neil isn't really defending his father's logic, he's trying to convince himself of it.

The boy is far too forgiving. But his next words ring closer to the truth.

"But he's planning the rest of my life for me, and I—he's never asked me what I want."

At that, Neil's eyes lift to him.

They're desperate, searching, as if begging for an answer that will make everything simple again.

In that moment, Keating sees him not as the self-assured leader, not as the confident young man the others idolize, but as what he truly is: a boy.

A boy with dreams.

A boy who just wants to be in a play.

The sight of it pulls at something deep within Keating.

If only Mr. Perry could see him this way too.

If only Neil could show him who he really is.

"Have you ever told your father what you just told me?" Keating asks softly. "About your passion for acting? Have you ever shown him that?"

Neil's head is already shaking before the question is finished, his eyes glassy.

"I *can't*," he says, voice barely above a whisper.

"Why not?" Keating asks, his tone gentle, careful not to push too hard.

Surely the boy must know he has the right, the right to his own wants, to his own life.

Neil looks down, gulping back what Keating assumes are tears, threatening to fall.

"I can't talk to him that way."

Neil's voice breaks, quieter, smaller than Keating has ever heard it.

For a moment, Keating wants to reach out. To wipe the boy's tears away.

To tell him to do the play anyway, to tell his father to go to hell. But he doesn't.

Instead, he does all he can do. Encourage, advise, guide.

"Then you're acting for him, too," he says gently. "You're playing the part of the dutiful son."

Neil flinches at that, shoulders drawing in, eyes darting to the floor. His turmoil is written plainly across his face. Keating leans forward, trying to meet his gaze.

"I know this sounds impossible," he says softly, "but you have to talk to him. You have to show him who you are. What your heart is."

It's the only way. At least, as far as Keating can see.

Perhaps Mr. Perry truly doesn't know what this means to his son, perhaps he sees only a frivolous pastime where there is, in truth, passion and purpose.

Surely any father would want their child to be happy.

The thought of Neil giving up the play, of watching that bright spark extinguish, twists something inside him.

The boy cannot go through life like this, forever serving others while denying himself.

But Neil just shakes his head, hopelessly.

"I know what he'll say," he murmurs. "He'll tell me acting's a whim, and I should forget it."

He sniffs, tears gathering again. "That they're counting on me."

Keating feels rage stir deep in his chest, quiet, controlled, but burning.

Why do parents insist on burdening their children with their own unfulfilled dreams? Why must Neil carry the weight of his father's fear?

“He’ll just tell me to put it out of my mind,” Neil finishes, hollow. “For my own good.”

Keating’s heart aches.

The boy looks so utterly defeated.

So young.

So afraid.

He wishes he could free him, but the most he can do is remind him of his power.

“You are not an indentured servant,” he says firmly, managing to meet Neil’s eyes at last.

“If it’s not a whim for you, prove it to him. With your conviction, your passion. Show him that. And if he still doesn’t believe you…” He pauses and softens slightly at the look on the boy’s face. “Then by the time you’re out of school, you can do anything you want.”

“No. What about the play? The show’s tomorrow night.”

Neil sniffles, swiping at his face.

The poor boy.

Keating has never seen him so utterly undone.

Neil, who always keeps himself composed, the one who holds everyone else together, now looks on the verge of collapse.

Keating’s chest tightens. Perhaps this breaking point might be the beginning of something new.

A chance for the boy to live honestly, to stop apologising for who he is.

“Well,” Keating says gently, “you have to talk to him before tomorrow night.”

He says it like it’s simple, though he knows it isn’t.

But there’s no other way.

Neil can’t hide again, not from his father, not from himself.

He has to try to be heard, truly heard, for once in his life.

“I—” Neil’s lip trembles. His gaze flickers around the room, searching for an escape that isn’t there. Finally, he looks back at Keating, eyes pleading. “Isn’t there an easier way?”

Keating exhales softly. “No.”

He wishes there were.

God, how he wishes there were.

He’d take the boy’s pain himself if he could.

Shoulder the weight, confront the father, rewrite the whole damned script.

But that isn’t his role.

That would be overstepping.

His duty is to guide, not to shield.

To teach them to fight their own battles.

Neil lets out a dry, hollow laugh.

“I’m *trapped*.”

Keating will never forget the look that accompanies those words, the tears, the defeat, the quiet resignation.

The boy looks like he’s already halfway gone.

There’s so much he wants to say. So much he wants to *do*.

If he had the power, he’d storm into Mr. Perry’s home and tell him exactly what he thinks of his cruelty.

Ask why a man so desperate for control would rather break his son than just listen to him.

But he can’t.

All he can do is remind Neil of what he’s spent months trying to teach him.

That no one owns him, that freedom is already his if he can only see

it.

Keating meets his eyes, steady, certain.

“No,” he says quietly. “You’re not.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the last little bit of angst before some fluff. Stay tuned folks!!

Chapter 27: Chapter 27.

Chapter Notes

> Back agaaaain!!! Nice to see you all again so soon. This one has been semi written for a while but in editing it - it really took form, so I hope you enjoy what it melded into.
>
> There's moments in this I meant to come later, but the way it was flowing - it naturally seemed to move towards those moments so the next few chapters may need some heavy editing lmao.
>
> This is by FARRRR my longest chapter to date so get some popcorn and enjoy some hurt/comfort/fluff/angst all in one x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd.

As he walks back into their dorm after dinner, Todd is more than a little surprised to find that Neil is still gone.

He'd expected to walk in and find the poor boy shaken from his conversation with his father, perhaps even expected Mr. Perry to still be there, drilling into his son.

He'd half hoped he'd find his courage if that were the case.

That he might finally stand up, tell Mr. Perry to leave Neil alone.

To back off.

To go be his old miserable self somewhere else.

To use his voice in a way he never seems to be able to.

But there's no one there.

Only traces of Neil's return from rehearsal.

His satchel lies on the bed, his script open and abandoned on the floor.

A drawer hangs ajar, clothes rifled through.

The bed slightly disheveled, as though someone had been sitting there recently.

But Neil is not there now.

It shouldn't worry Todd as much as it does.

It isn't unusual for Neil to be showering this late, or sneaking down to the dining hall for leftovers, or even tucked away in the library for some last-minute cramming.

But tonight feels different. Knowing his father must have confronted him, knowing how cruel that man can be…

Todd feels a knot of unease tighten in his stomach.

He dreads to think what was said to Neil, what venom was spat at that beautiful boy.

The harsh words thrown towards that kind soul who only ever wants to please everyone.

Who has never once put himself first… and now that he has… oh how *cruel* that man is.

How can Mr. Perry not see how wonderful he is?

How can he not love the soul beneath the "perfect son," the "future doctor"?

How can he not see Neil for who he truly is?

The best human being on planet Earth.

Todd wishes he'd been there.

To stop him, to shout, to stand up, to knock the words right out of Mr. Perry's mouth.

But that's wishful thinking.

Todd knows he isn't brave enough.

Neil deserves better.

More courage.

More fight.

More… everything.

Todd settles eventually at his desk and opens his notebook. Resigned to just wait for Neil to come back.

To explain everything himself. He'll come eventually.

He turns to his English assignment, the only work at Welton that feels remotely joyful to do.

Keating never sets homework just for the sake of it. There's always some deeper meaning behind it, always something larger to find.

This week's task is to be ones own muse: *a self-portrait in poetry form*, as Keating had put it.

It could take on any tone they wished, so long as it painted a picture of who they were as a person.

Months ago, the very idea would've made Todd shrink back in dread.

Talking about himself had never been easy, he'd barely felt like a real person back then.

Now, while it still isn't easy, it feels possible.

For the first time, he feels a little more like someone whole.

Not just part of a herd.

He works on it for a good hour, surprised at how easily the words seem to pour out of him.

———

Youngest Son

by Todd Anderson

Where did he go?

I swore he was here.

I heard a whisper —

“Who goes there?”

A tiptoe on the cashmere rug,

“Nothing there,” they all just shrug.

The boy in bronze upon the wall —

there was another, as I recall.

Birthday cake, the same old song,

but I think they sang it wrong.

A desk set sits in an empty room —

only silence, endless gloom.

Did he exist,

was that just fable?

An empty space

upon the table.

He left no trace.

Where did he go?

The youngest son —

I'll never know.

It's not bad for a first draft, Todd thinks.

Maybe it's a little too depressing to read on Tuesday, but Keating always seems to like a sad subject matter.

Still, it feels a bit raw.

Too close to something he's kept hidden for too long.

Every line feels like a quiet confession he hadn't meant to make, a truth that slipped out before he could stop it.

He wonders if the others will understand it, or if they'll just smile politely, maybe even pity him.

The thought makes his stomach twist.

But the truth of it pulls at him all the same.

That small boy who still lives somewhere deep inside, the one who always tried to disappear, who never spoke up or got noticed, deserves a voice.

A voice he never had.

And maybe, Todd thinks, if he can read this out loud, maybe that will mean he's starting to find it.

He sets his pen down, staring at the page for a moment longer.

The dorm is quiet now, the kind of quiet that hums in his ears.

Beyond the window, the night presses against the glass, moonlight pooling faintly on the floor.

The wind rattles faintly at the window, a cold whisper seeping through the cracks.

He glances down at the watch Jeffrey gave him.

9:32 p.m.

A small frown tugs at his brow.

Neil should really be back by now.

He tells himself not to worry.

Tells himself Neil's probably fine, probably just lost track of time.

Probably just nervous about tomorrow.

But the words don't hold.

That uneasy feeling from earlier twists tighter in his chest.

Curfew's creeping closer.

If he's caught out now, he could get in real trouble.

Todd's pulse picks up.

He hesitates only a second before pushing back his chair.

He needs to find him.

What if something *bad* happened?

He can't not check on him.

He has to be brave.

He peeks into the hallway, scanning for any sign of Dr. Hager.

Nothing.

He exhales quietly, heart hammering, and slips out the door.

The corridors are cold and echoing.

Every sound, his footsteps, a distant door closing, feels too loud.

He checks the dining hall first.

Empty.

Then the library.

The showers.

The common rooms.

No sign of Neil.

He's about to give up when, through the window, a flicker of light catches his eye, a faint glow moving against the dark outside.

A torch.

Someone's standing down by the dock.

And somehow, he just *knows*.

Without stopping to think, Todd bolts for the door, the night air biting instantly at his face.

He's forgotten his coat, his scarf, his everything.

The cold hits like a slap, but he doesn't slow down.

Neil needs someone.

As he closes in, he sees it clearer now.

A lone figure stands at the edge of the dock, looking out over the black water.

For a second, Todd almost doubts his eyes, the way the moonlight catches on the outline of a boy, the faint, tinny sound of music drifting through the still night air.

It takes him a moment to recognise the soft melody: a slow ballad, trembling from the little radio Meeks and Pitts built weeks ago.

Neil must have borrowed it for some reason.

If Todd weren't so confused, so afraid of why Neil would be out here alone, it might even be a pretty sight.

The mist curling off the lake, the faint glow of the torch painting him in gold, the music drifting softly through the cold air.

The whole thing would almost feel cinematic, like something out of one of Neil's beloved old movies.

But right now, all Todd can feel is dread tightening in his chest.

He walks closer, his shoes crunching quietly against the frost-hardened boards.

When he's near enough that his footsteps can be heard, the figure turns.

Neil's face comes into view, red from the cold, eyes wide and wet.

For a heartbeat, he looks terrified, like he's bracing to see Hager, or McAllister, or even Nolan.

Then his gaze finds Todd, and the fear dissolves, replaced by a flood of relief.

It's fleeting though; concern quickly takes its place as he notices Todd shuddering in just his sweatshirt.

"Todd… geez, you must be freezing."

Before Todd can answer, Neil reaches for him unthinkingly, clasping his hands and rubbing them briskly to warm them.

It doesn't help much, Neil's fingers are just as cold, but the touch alone sends a rush of heat through Todd's chest, stronger than any fire could.

"What are you doing out here, Neil?" Todd asks, his voice unsteady.

He knows how desperate he must sound, but he doesn't care. "I was… I was so worried."

Neil ducks his head, shame flickering across his face.

Up close, Todd can see his eyes are rimmed red, he's been crying.

He moves a little nearer, unsure how to help, afraid to say the wrong thing but even more afraid to say nothing.

"Neil, what happened? I… I saw your father. What did he say to you? Did he—did he hurt you? I was so—"

Neil shakes his head quickly, still holding Todd's hands like he hasn't even noticed he's doing it.

"It's what you'd expect," he says quietly. "He says I'm out of the play.

I can't be Puck."

He tries for a shrug, but it's weak, hollow, and the small, shaky sniff that slips out betrays everything he's trying to hide.

Todd feels his own heart drop at the sight of him, so utterly defeated.

"Oh, Neil…" he breathes, sadness and a sharp, unfamiliar anger rising all at once.

The injustice of it hits him like a blow.

How could anyone,how could his own father, take away the one thing that makes him come alive like that?

"He can't ban you from it," Todd blurts, fiercer than he means to. "You *have* to do it. You were born for the stage, Neil."

Neil exhales shakily, his breath curling white in the winter air.

"He can, and he will," he says quietly. "It's… it's over, Todd. It's all over."

His eyes stay fixed on the water, unreadable in the half-light.

"No it's not," Todd insists, though the words sound hollow even to him. "C-could you talk to Keating? Maybe he'll… maybe he'll know what to do."

Neil shakes his head, blinking back tears, but one escapes, glinting as it falls.

"I already talked to Keating," he says finally. "He reckons I should talk to him. To my father. Tomorrow. Before the show."

He swallows hard, voice thinning to almost nothing. "He won't *listen*, Todd. He never will."

Todd shifts closer, the dock creaking softly beneath them.

He wishes he could ground Neil somehow, that his touch might be enough to keep him from unraveling further.

"D'you reckon you could try, at least?" he asks, quieter now, gentler.

But Neil only shakes his head, a hollow laugh slipping out.

“Keating means well,” he murmurs, a wry smile ghosting across his face. “But not all adults are like he is.”

They both chuckle softly at that understatement.

It’s true, there isn’t another man on Earth remotely like their eccentric and affectionate English teacher.

Todd glances down. Their hands are still joined, Neil hasn’t pulled away.

His thumbs trace slow, nervous circles over Neil’s knuckles, as if he could smooth away the tremor there.

If he could, he’d hold him until everything was fixed. Until the world was kind.

Todd looks up at him again, at the downcast face, the quiet, melancholy acceptance.

“It’s really over Todd. There’s nothing else I can do.” Neil sniffs, looking down.

Where’s the spark he loves so much in Neil?

Where’s the *fight*?

Why does Mr. Perry get to decide who Neil is allowed to be?

Todd can’t accept that.

He *won’t*.

“No,” Todd says, sharply, louder than he meant to.

Neil blinks, startled. “What do you mean… no?”

And then his lip quirks, recognition flickering in his eyes.

Todd hesitates for a heartbeat, then smiles too.

They’re both remembering that day in their dorm, the day Neil had refused to believe Todd had to always take care of himself.

Now it’s Todd’s turn to refuse.

His turn to keep Neil from giving up, from being dragged back under

by Tom Perry's will.

"*No*," he repeats, this time with intent, echoing Neil's old grin.

Neil lets out a small breath, a reluctant laugh through his nose, amusement breaking through the heaviness, just for a moment.

And then, suddenly, something clicks.

An idea forms in Todd's mind.

It's so simple.

Maybe dumb.

Barely a solution, but… it might be their only option.

Neil's next Carpe Diem.

"Neil…" Todd starts, then falters, his voice barely above the whisper of the wind. "How would… how would he even *know*? If you just… did the play?"

Neil's head jerks up, startled. For a second, confusion clouds his face and then Todd watches it dawn on him slowly, but surely.

"You mean…?"

"Yes," Todd says, so uncharacteristically sure that it surprises even him. "I mean."

Neil just stares at him for a long heartbeat.

Then, impossibly, he smiles, really smiles.

That bright, unguarded grin Todd hasn't seen in hours. It hits him like sunlight breaking through cloud.

"Todd Anderson," Neil breathes, shaking his head, eyes glittering beautifully. "Are you telling me I should *lie*?"

"Not lie," Todd says, shrugging one shoulder, his lips twitching into something that's almost a smile. "Just… omit. What harm would it do? He won't know until after. And by then—" he pauses, watching Neil's expression soften, "—by then you'll be the talk of the town. It'd look bad on him to stop you."

Neil tilts his head, studying him with something like awe. “You think I’d get away with it?”

“Why not?” Todd says simply. “You’re a talented actor. What’s one more performance?”

Neil laughs, really laughs this time, and the sound bursts into the night, rich and alive.

Todd can’t help but grin too, warmth flooding through him.

Neil inches even closer and the radio hums quietly behind them, as if the whole world has taken a breath.

“You really are a dark horse,” Neil murmurs, voice low, eyes alight again. “No one would believe me if I told them how rebellious sweet little Todd can be.”

That spark, that fearless, radiant spark, is back, glowing in his gaze like firelight catching glass.

The corner of his mouth quirks, teasing, but there’s something else beneath it, relief, maybe, or gratitude.

Something quiet and raw.

Todd only shrugs, pretending at nonchalance even as his heart hammers beneath his sweater.

He can’t quite believe the affection in Neil’s eyes, the warmth threading through his voice. His fingers twitch against Neil’s, realizing for the first time just how natural it feels, how right it is to be holding his hand.

“You should see yourself when you talk about acting,” he says softly after a moment. “You look alive. Like that’s who you’re supposed to be.”

Neil’s eyes glint even more than Todd thought possible, that same light shimmering through the fine mist of their breath.

“There’s no way I’m letting your father ruin that,” Todd finishes decisively, the words tumbling out before he can overthink them. “So you should just… do it anyway.”

Neil exhales a quiet laugh, not mocking, but touched, almost disbelieving.

The sound seems to hang in the cold night air, gentle and fleeting.

He studies Todd for a long moment, his expression softening.

"*Todd*…" he murmurs, voice barely above the wind. "How do you always know just what to say?"

Todd almost laughs at that. "I *never* know what to say," he admits, voice barely above the whisper of wind. "But I do know what I mean."

He hesitates, then adds softly, "Especially when it comes to you."

Neil huffs quietly through his nose, eyes flicking toward him. For a few moments, neither of them looks away.

The silence that falls upon them isn't uncomfortable. It hums, quiet, alive.

Broken only by the faint lapping of water against the dock.

Their breath clouds and drifts together in the cold, and Todd can hear the faint rhythm of Neil's, steadying now, calmer than before.

He's still so close.

Close enough that Todd can see the small crease at the corner of his mouth when he exhales, the way the moonlight settles in his hair.

Todd doesn't often get the chance to just *look* at Neil, to really take him in, to study his face for longer than a few seconds.

In the twilight, he looks almost otherworldly. Todd's certain he's never seen anyone so radiant.

Not the movie stars in the pictures, not the singers in magazines, not even the models who are meant to be perfect.

None of them come close to Neil Perry.

He knows he's biased, *hopelessly* so, but he's sure he's right.

There's no one else like his gorgeous roommate, his dearest friend… maybe even something more.

He hardly dares to hope most of the time, but tonight, the way Neil's looking back at him, like he feels it too, makes hope flare, fragile and

bright.

The world feels impossibly still.

Only the soft shift of water below and the bite of the cold air remind Todd they're still here, still tethered to the real world.

That invisible thread between them hums as it always does.

Quiet, certain, *alive*.

Neil glances down, his thumb brushing against Todd's hand again, a light, uncertain touch, but deliberate.

"Thanks," he says softly after a moment.

Todd blinks, puzzled, unsure what Neil could possibly be thanking him for.

The word sits strangely with him; he's not used to being noticed, let alone appreciated.

It makes something flutter uncomfortably in his chest.

His parents really have done a number on him.

Neil meets his gaze, eyes steady now.

"For looking for me," he says quietly. "For being here. You're…. you're amazing Todd."

Todd's heart lurches, and he swallows, unsure what to do with the way the words hit him, the warmth in them, the weight.

"You don't have to thank me," he murmurs. "I just… I didn't want you to be alone tonight."

He instantly wishes he'd said something better, something that didn't sound so cheesy.

But Neil's lips curve faintly again, not quite a smile, more like something private, unreadable.

A long pause settles between them, filled with the whisper of the lake and the soft hum of their breath.

Just when Todd starts to think the moment has passed, Neil speaks

again, so quietly Todd almost misses it.

“It’s just that,” he says, voice fragile but sure, “you make things feel a little less impossible…you know?”

Todd’s throat tightens, and he opens his mouth… but before he can muster a coherent response, the radio crackles beside them, static breaking through the hush.

The faint hum gives way to the swell of a new tune, gentle, haunting.

The opening chords drift out over the water like a phantom.

They asked me how I knew my true love was true,

I, of course, replied,

“Something here inside cannot be denied…”

Todd’s head tilts slightly. “Hey, I know this one. My folks loved it. I think it was their wedding song or something.”

Neil listens and starts to hum along for a moment, swaying absently on the spot. He drops Todd’s hands finally, and Todd tries not to pine too much for his touch.

He takes the opportunity to just stare at Neil.

Todd can’t look away. There’s something about the way Neil moves, unthinking, unposed, that feels almost hypnotic.

Maybe it’s the performer in him, that quiet, effortless magnetism that draws the world in without trying.

He doesn’t even have to do anything; he just exists, and the air seems to shift around him.

It’s that same spark Todd noticed the very first day, when Neil had first turned toward him and smiled, and for a moment, Todd forgot how to breathe.

That hasn’t changed.

He's been caught ever since.

Helplessly, hopelessly.

Now, watching the way the light tangles in Neil's hair, the slow tilt of his head to the rhythm, the moonlight gliding along his cheekbones and throat like silver paint, Todd knows he never will stop.

Todd's chest tightens.

He wonders if Neil even realises what he does to people, how easily he draws every eye without meaning to, how presence alone feels like performance.

Even now, in a worn jumper and wind-tousled curls, he looks unreal.

Like he's been conjured from some half-remembered dream.

He would probably envy how effortlessly stunning Neil is, if he didn't love him more than life itself.

Neil's eyes flick open again, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Yeah… I know this one too," he says. "It's a pretty song."

He seems to drift with it for a moment, the melody soft against the quiet. Todd watches the way Neil's expression shifts, like he's half in the present, half somewhere years ago.

Then, seeming to remember something, Neil lets out a sudden, boyish laugh.

"You know, at our spring formal, sophomore year, some girl asked me to dance when this was playing."

He rubs the back of his neck, sheepish. "I wasn't very good at it," he admits with a grin, glancing sideways at Todd, "but she didn't seem to mind."

Todd can't help smiling too, partly at the image, partly at the thought of Neil, all flustered and charming, trying to dance.

"Anyway," Neil continues, almost self-consciously, rubbing the back of his neck. "She seemed to just wanna dance with me all night. She was pretty nice, too."

Todd's smile wavers.

The image lingers, Neil laughing under soft gym lights, his hand on someone else's waist, spinning her clumsily but charmingly across the floor.

He can almost see it. And the thought twists something sharp and hot in his chest before he can stop it.

Neil notices, of course he does. He always does.

His grin tilts, half-teasing, half-knowing, and his eyes flicker with amusement.

"Hey, none of that," he says, bumping Todd's shoulder lightly. The contact sends a warm jolt through Todd despite the freezing air. Neil's tone softens a little, losing the teasing edge. "I mean it. Don't look like that."

Todd opens his mouth to deflect, to shrug it off, but Neil beats him to it.

"I'd have asked you if you were there," he adds quietly.

The words hang between them, fragile and astonishing in their honesty.

He says it like a joke, like he doesn't mean it, but the glance he gives Todd is too gentle, too steady.

The faint smile falters into something else, something unguarded and achingly sincere.

Todd forgets to breathe for a second. His pulse thunders in his throat.

It would've been impossible, of course.

Two boys dancing together at Welton?

At *any* school? The thought alone would've been enough to destroy them.

But still, for one dizzying, intoxicating heartbeat, Todd lets himself imagine it.

The lights, the music, Neil's hand in his.

The world not watching.

The world not caring.

Just being together.

Being allowed to be.

They said, "Someday, you'll find, all who love are blind,

When your heart's on fire,

You must realize, smoke gets in your eyes."

"I never had a formal," Todd admits after a moment. "Well…. Balincrest did throw a winter dance once. I didn't go."

"Why not?" Neil asks, already sensing the answer.

Todd doesn't say anything, but he remembers the kind of boys who would've made sure he regretted showing up,the laughter, the jabs, the long echo of it in the locker room.

Todd gives Neil a look, small, tired. Neil nods gently, no further questions needed.

"So… you've *never* danced with anyone?" Neil asks quietly.

Todd shakes his head. Before he can say more, Neil's hands move, tentative, almost testing, to rest against his waist.

"Do you…?"

Todd's throat goes dry. He can't find the words, so he nods.

Neil smiles faintly and pulls him close, guiding him with slow, careful steps.

Todd starts stiff, awkward, but Neil moves with such easy confidence that he begins to relax, until, without realising, he's leaning fully into Neil's chest.

The song swells around them. Neil starts to mouth the words, then

hums, then sings softly, his voice low and warm, blending with the crackle of the radio.

So, I chaffed them, and I gaily laughed,

To think they could doubt my love…

Of course he sings beautifully, Todd thinks, a quiet ache blooming in his chest. *Of course he does. He's Neil.*

Perfect, radiant Neil, the boy who could make Shakespeare sound like truth itself, who could smile and make the world feel possible again.

He can't tear his eyes away.

The song, the sway, the cold air biting at their cheeks, all of it feels suspended, unreal, like they've stepped outside of time.

Yet today, my love has flown away,

I am without my love…

Neil's voice trails into a hum, the space between them filled only by the soft friction of their sleeves brushing, the sound of their breath mingling in the dark.

This moment, this impossible, forbidden, perfect thing,feels like something neither of them will ever be able to name, but both will remember.

Now, laughing friends deride, tears I cannot hide…

Todd swallows hard, afraid that if he speaks, it'll all shatter.

So I smile and say

"When a lovely flame dies… smoke gets in your eyes…"

As the closing notes of the song drift away, they slow to a stop.

Neither lets go.

They simply stand there, still half-swaying, arms looped loosely around each other, the cold air curling around them.

Todd doesn't dare move. Doesn't dare break the spell.

Neil doesn't either. His hold tightens just slightly, not possessive, but needing. Seeking warmth. And not just from the winter air.

"*Todd*…" he whispers.

"Yes…" Todd breathes back, unsure if his name was meant as a question.

Neil only draws him closer, as though parting even for a second would undo him.

"I…" Neil starts, but his voice falters. Todd can feel his breath against his hairline, gentle, trembling.

It's so intimate it's almost too overwhelming.

"Todd… I… *I*…" He trails off again, sounding almost pained.

"I know," Todd says before he can think.

He doesn't know why says it.

Doesn't even know for sure what it is that he knows.

Only that it feels true, bone-deep and unshakable.

Neil exhales shakily against his hair, and Todd feels the words that don't come, the soft tremor of breath that says everything instead.

It all suddenly feels so unfathomably clear.

"I *know*…" he says again, quieter but steadier. "Me too."

Neil's breath hitches.

He pulls back just enough to look down at him, eyes wide and glassy, trembling somewhere between fear and longing.

That flicker, that small, desperate hope, nearly undoes Todd.

Todd can't help it, he leans up on his tiptoes and presses a kiss to Neil's high cheekbone.

He lets himself linger.

It's probably dangerous, probably insane, to do this here, out on the school grounds, where anyone could look out a window and see them.

But the second his lips touch Neil's skin, all the fear inside him disappears.

His self-doubt, the chatter that constantly clutters his mind, the gnawing fear of rejection, of persecution, of Neil never speaking to him again… it all fades into nothing.

It's just them.

For a single, suspended heartbeat, the world holds its breath.

The warmth beneath Todd's lips feels almost holy.

When he finally pulls back, Neil's eyes are wide, blown and dark, mouth half-open, like he wants to speak but can't quite find the words.

His hands clutch at Todd, desperate to keep him close, to stop this moment from slipping away.

"T-Todd…" Neil's gaze flickers to his lips, and Todd just knows.

He knows they're both thinking the same thing.

That they want to close that last, impossible inch. To finally let it happen.

But they're outside.

Exposed.

The dorm lights spill faintly across the snow, and somewhere in the distance, the crunch of footsteps could only mean Hager has started his nighttime patrol.

If they were found like this, like *this*, it wouldn't just mean demerits.

It would mean ruin.

"*Todd*…" Neil says again, barely audible.

Todd has to close his eyes. No one's ever said his name like that before, like a secret, like a confession.

"Neil…" He swallows, drinking in the moment for a few seconds more before forcing himself to move.

A quiet whine catches in his throat as he pulls away, releasing Neil.

When he meets the brunette's eyes, Neil looks as bereft at the loss of touch as he feels.

"We… we have to get back."

Neil looks dazed, eyes still wide and blown, cheeks pink, still staring at Todd's lips.

When he absently licks his lower lip, Todd wants to kick something.

It isn't *fair*. He doesn't want this to end. God, he doesn't.

Every part of him is screaming to stay, to just close that last inch and kiss him.

Really kiss him, like they would if this were a movie and they were the romantic leads.

If they were allowed to want each other this much.

"W-we can't, Neil. Not here…" His eyes flicker toward the building, then back.

Neil's expression clouds with reluctant understanding.

He exhales sharply, frustration threading through the sound, and steps back.

Todd can't help a small, breathless laugh. Neil looks so rumpled and

annoyed… *annoyed* at the prospect of not being able to kiss him.

It's almost ridiculous how beautiful he still manages to look like this, hair mussed, coat askew, breath misting in the cold. Todd's heart gives a painful squeeze.

Neil may be gorgeous, all handsome and roguish, a true James Dean type, a dreamboat with that soft, beautiful, masculine energy… but when it's just the two of them, when the world has gone still like this, he's something else entirely.

He's *adorable*.

"You look so… cute." The word slips out before Todd can stop it.

Neil turns as red as the stripes on their Welton ties.

Todd can't help giggling, the sound bubbling out of him before he can swallow it back.

Seeing Neil flustered like this, shy, uncertain, so unlike his usual confident self, is almost too much to bear.

For a second, Neil looks like he might reach for him again, pull him close despite everything.

But he exhales sharply, dragging a hand through his hair instead.

"You're gonna kill me, Anderson," he mutters, half-groan, half-laugh.

Todd loves him so ferociously it feels like he might come apart at the seams.

"C'mon." He reaches for him again, taking his hand to lead him back toward the Academy.

Neil goes easily.

Almost *too* easily.

Like Todd's become magnetic somehow, like Neil's helpless to do anything but follow, to go wherever Todd goes.

Their hands stay linked until the courtyard lamps come into view. They still walk close, though.

Close enough that Todd can feel the faint hum of him, that thrumming

warmth that lingers in the air between them, steady and alive.

When they reach their room, Neil pushes the door closed behind them.

The sound is soft, but it feels final somehow, like it seals them away from the rest of the world.

For a moment, neither of them moves.

They just stand there, facing each other across the narrow space, the air thick with everything they haven't said.

Todd can hear the tick of the Grandfather clock down the hallway, the faint rush of wind against the windowpanes.

He can feel his pulse in his throat.

Neil's gaze flickers up to meet his, then down again.

They both duck their heads, shy in the same breath.

The tension between them is almost unbearable, shimmering, electric, impossible to name.

"Todd…" Neil whispers. His voice is thin, uncertain. "Can you… could we… I—" He falters, blushes, then steadies himself. "Come *here*."

Todd's head jerks up. Neil stands across the room with his arms slightly outstretched, an invitation, open and wordless.

Todd feels weightless as he crosses the floor.

He doesn't walk so much as drift, drawn forward like something caught in orbit.

When he reaches Neil, he lets himself be pulled in, folded against him.

He gasps softly as they seem to melt together.

It's the closest they've ever been.

Sure, they've hugged before, quick, casual things. A pat on the back after a soccer win, a brief squeeze before parting ways.

The kind of gestures boys are allowed.

Safe.

Unassuming.

But this isn't that. This is nothing like that.

He's in Neil's arms.

Neil is *holding* him.

And there's no disguising it, no pretending it's anything other than what it is.

There's no doubt in Todd's mind what this means.

"Neil…" Todd breathes the name more than he says it, soft, like it's something sacred.

Neil doesn't let go.

If anything, he gathers Todd closer, tucking him in like he's afraid the world might take him away.

Todd can feel the steady rise and fall of his chest, the thrum of his heartbeat syncing with his own, uneven, fluttering, but in perfect time.

"Please," Neil whispers, voice catching. "Just… let me hold you, Todd. I— I *need* you."

He sounds small again. Frightened. But beneath it there's a kind of certainty too, the sound of someone who's found exactly what he's been searching for.

"Okay," Todd murmurs.

He burrows in closer, fitting himself against Neil's shoulder, letting the warmth and the weight of him erase every sharp edge inside. "Okay…"

They stay like that for what feels like hours, though it's probably only minutes.

Time doesn't feel real when Neil's arms are around him.

The world has shrunk to breath and heartbeat and quiet.

When a soft knock finally breaks the silence, they both jump and Neil lets out an irritated huff.

“If that’s Cameron again, I’m gonna—”

Todd can’t help it, he laughs, pressing a hand gently to Neil’s chest to hush him.

“Shh… don’t,” he says, grinning. “If it is Cameron, he’ll hear you.”

“Let him hear me,” Neil mutters, half joking, half defiant.

Todd’s laughter bubbles out, muffled against Neil’s shoulder. “You’re impossible.”

Neil’s grin widens, that wide, hopelessly happy grin that makes Todd’s chest ache in the best possible way.

When they part, they’re still a little giddy, breathless, suspended somewhere between laughter and something far more dangerous.

The air feels charged again, like if either of them moves too quickly, they’ll end up right back where they were a few minutes ago, pressed together, hearts racing.

Neil’s still smiling when he says, softly, “God, you make me crazy, Anderson.”

Todd can only stare, a smile tugging helplessly at his lips.

Every part of him wants to reach for Neil again, to pull him back in, to kiss that grin he’s dreamed about for months —

But before he can move, a sharper knock jolts them both.

Oh, right. The door.

God, Todd had already forgotten.

He and Neil trade a wide-eyed look, breathless again for entirely different reasons.

Neil straightens his jumper, runs a hand through his hair, as if that could possibly make him look any less dishevelled.

“I swear,” Neil mutters under his breath, crossing to the door, “if it’s you, Ca—”

He pulls it open mid-sentence, and stops dead.

A woman stands there, trembling in the hallway. Her cheeks are streaked with tears, her coat half-buttoned, hair once carefully styled now tumbling loose.

She looks like she's run the whole way.

The cold rushes in from the corridor, slicing through the warmth of the room.

Todd stares, heart thudding painfully against his ribs, because there's something about her, the shape of her face, the desperate look in her eyes, that feels familiar.

And then it hits him.

He's seen her before.

The first day of term.

Standing beside Mr. Perry at the Welton opening ceremony.

It has to be—

"Mother?" Neil says, his voice cracking around the word, raw with confusion.

Oh geez, Todd thinks, *what now?*

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know interrupted again.

(Booooo tomato tomato)

But the destiny will be fulfilled in good time my friends.

Thank you all for supporting this fic that's taken over my brain the past month. It's a joy to write and I'm gonna do my best to do these boys justice.

Chapter 28: Chapter 28.

Chapter Notes

> Sooooo another chapter that completely changed from where it originally was in my head. This one is pretty much Mrs. Perry focused, but the next two will be very Todd-centric and the following two will be very Neil-centric. So stay tuned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mrs. Perry.

11 hours earlier.

Patty reaches for the key, turns it in the lock… only to find the front door is already open.

She freezes.

Strange. She could've sworn she'd locked it.

She *always* does.

She was *meticulous* about such things.

Careful to a fault.

Tom had drilled it into her from the moment they'd moved in: *You can never be too careful, Patricia.*

He'd taught her how to check the locks twice before bed, how to wedge the windows shut on windy nights, how to listen for unfamiliar sounds.

He'd called it "prudence."

Patty thought it bordered on *obsession*, though she would never dare voice this, of course.

It was her duty as his wife to bear his fears, his paranoia, as though they were her own.

So every time she went out, whether to the store, the post office, or even just to fetch the milk from the porch, she would turn the key once, twice, thrice, just to be sure.

Tom Perry was a paranoid man.

She'd known this from the start.

He had his rituals: sleeping with a knife on the bedside table, spending long minutes at the peephole before answering the door.

Once, he'd even considered getting a guard dog, but had ultimately decided against it.

"*Animals are unpredictable,*" he'd concluded. "*They bite when they shouldn't.*"

Instead, Tom kept three guns in the house.

One in the basement, "*the safest part of the house,*" he'd said. "*If we ever have to take cover, that's where you'll run*."

The second was somewhere in their bedroom.

Patty didn't know exactly where; she wasn't supposed to.

"*You needn't worry yourself with that sort of thing,*" Tom had told her.

The third he kept locked in his desk drawer.

Why he chose that place, she couldn't say. She'd never dared to ask.

It wasn't her business. Tom had made that much clear.

"*They're to keep us safe, Patty,*" he'd told her the day he brought them home.

She'd been eight months pregnant then, anxious, exhausted, hands constantly fluttering to her stomach as if she could shield the baby through sheer will alone.

Guns in the house had been anything but a comfort.

"*It's to protect the baby. Our son,*" he'd insisted, resting a heavy hand on her shoulder. "*And one day, you'll thank me. Mark my words.*"

She'd nodded, because that's what she did.

But the words had never settled right. Even now, all these years later, the thought of those guns made her uneasy.

Tom thought of them as symbols of having control, of safety.

But to Patty, they'd always felt like the opposite, ticking time bombs waiting for a moment of weakness.

She'd never told him that, of course. He wouldn't understand.

Sometimes she worried Tom saw danger before he saw anything else, violence before beauty, threat before grace.

She often wondered who he imagined would come after them, of all people.

Their home was modest.

No jewels, no valuables.

Just family heirlooms, photographs, Neil's framed awards.

No safe.

No fortune to steal.

So who, really, was Tom afraid of?

Still, as Patty turns the handle now, cautiously, her heart ticking faster than she'd like, she can't help but wonder if Tom had been right all along.

For a fleeting second, she braces herself, half expecting to see the place in disarray, drawers rifled through, strangers waiting in the shadows to pounce on her.

Her mind paints scenes she doesn't want to imagine: a shattered vase, an open back door, footprints on the rug.

But the house is perfectly still.

Tom's hat hangs neatly on the coatrack.

His shoes sit by the door, lined up with military precision, soles wiped clean.

The faint scent of his aftershave lingers, cedar and pine.

Patty frowns.

Why is Tom home?

He'd told her he'd be at the office all day.

Important meetings.

He was to be back late.

She glances at the clock in the hallway.

12:35 p.m.

Too early.

Far too early.

Perhaps he felt unwell? Maybe the meeting had been cancelled?

Or…her stomach tightens. Maybe he'd had one of his temper spells again and come home in a rage.

That's happened a few times, and it has never been pleasant to behold.

She starts toward the stairs, meaning to check the bedroom, but before she can reach the first step, a low voice carries from the study.

"You cannot be serious," Tom is saying, his tone clipped, unfamiliar. "You have to be lying, Mr. Franklin…"

Patty freezes.

Mr. Franklin, Tom's superior.

But why would he be phoning here?

Tom never took work calls at home, not unless it was urgent.

She moves closer to the door, the heel of her shoe scuffing softly on the hardwood. Through the narrow crack where the door hasn't quite latched, she can see Tom's back, rigid in his chair, one hand clutching the telephone receiver, the other fisted so tightly on the desk she can see the veins stand out on his arm.

"…after everything I've done for this company," he hisses. "You think

you can just...?"

His voice cuts off, replaced by the faint, tinny murmur of whoever is on the other end.

Patty's pulse stutters.

Something is very wrong.

She takes another step closer, hardly daring to breathe.

"Sir… it's hard enough as it is… Neil at school and all. He's on a scholarship, but...no, I understand."

Tom's voice is tighter now, quieter. A pause. Then a small, resigned exhale.

"How long?" he asks, almost under his breath. Another long silence follows, the faint hum of static filling the space. Finally, he sighs.

"Fine. Two months is sufficient."

Patty feels her stomach twist. His tone carries the dull weight of a man defeated, the kind of tone she's only ever heard once before, after his father's funeral.

"Thank you, sir."

The receiver clicks back into place. Tom stays seated for a moment longer, staring straight ahead. His shoulders slump, and his jaw works as if he's chewing over something bitter.

Patty takes a careful step forward, the floorboard betraying her with a soft *creak*.

"Don't eavesdrop, dear," Tom says without turning. His voice is sharp, weary. "Just come in."

No point pretending now. She smooths her skirt and steps inside.

The study smells of cigar smoke and old paper.

Afternoon light slants through the blinds, striping the room in alternating bands of gold and shadow. Tom sits behind his desk, his jacket still on but his tie loosened. His face is pale, his hair mussed from running his hands through it.

“My dear… what ha-”

Tom slams his palms on the desk, the sound cracking through the stillness like a gunshot.

“Dammit, woman, you know *damn well* what happened! Don’t tiptoe around me. I’m a grown man and the provider of this household. You will not treat me with kid gloves.”

Patty flinches. Her throat tightens. Every instinct tells her to retreat, to keep quiet, but she forces herself to stand still.

It’s her wifely duty to comfort Tom.

“I only meant…*why* did it happen?” She tries, treading carefully.

“Layoffs,” he spits. “More computers can do what I can now. Laying off half of us. The company’s struggling, simple as that.”

The words land like a twist of the knife.

Tom laid off… it could mean ruin.

She presses a hand to her chest. “Oh, Tom… but surely you’ll find something soon. Something *better*. You’re so good at your j-”

“Don’t be so naïve, woman.” He cuts her off with a sharp gesture. “The reason I even got this job was because of my uncle. It’s going to be hard.”

Patty opens her mouth, searching for the right comfort, but her voice comes out barely a whisper. “Well, you’re not far from retirement, dear. I’m sure there’s enough to…”

“To support us?” He laughs bitterly. “To support Neil? Dammit, woman. Harvard doesn’t just give scholarships to anyone. The boy’s going to have to work incredibly hard. And he’d *better*. We cannot afford the standard tuition. Not even with our savings.”

Patty lowers her eyes. The mention of Neil always seems to twist something sharp between them.

Their son, brilliant, kind, burdened with the weight of Tom’s expectations.

“Oh…” she says softly.

"*Oh*…" He repeats the word, an echo sharpened into mockery. "Indeed."

He rises from the chair, straightening his jacket as though reassembling armour.

Patty stays very still. Her mind races.

There have to be other options, other ways out of this mess… maybe she could write to her father, see if he still has connections at the bank.

It wouldn't pay much, but it would at least be *something*.

Something to keep Tom occupied.

The thought of him home all day, angry and idle, pacing those halls with no purpose…it chills her.

She doesn't think she would survive that.

For a moment, he's quiet. Almost still.

Then he looks at her, and there's a sudden strange, simmering calm in his eyes.

"I saw Mrs. Marks on my way back from the office today."

Patty blinks. "Mrs. Marks?"

That surprises her. Mrs. Marks is exactly the sort of woman Tom usually avoids, a town gossip with too much rouge and too little sense.

A divorcee, no less.

The kind of woman Tom urges Patty not to associate with, perhaps out of fear that it might be catching.

Patty could only dream.

The idea of him stopping to *chat* with her doesn't fit at all, and something about the ease in his tone unsettles her further.

“It’s funny, Patty.” His voice is oddly polite now, almost conversational. But his eyes are cold. “She told me something… interesting.”

Patty frowns, uncertain.

Interesting?

Mrs. Marks, of all people?

Tom can’t stand her.

He’s called her *“a tacky meddler with no class”* … and far worse than that, words Patty wouldn’t dare repeat in civilised company.

What could that woman possibly have said that he’d take seriously?

“Oh? And what’s that?” she dares to ask.

Tom steps around the desk, moving closer. His expression is composed, but the twitch in his jaw betrays him.

He’s building to something… she can sense it.

It’s a tactic of his: drawing things out, circling her like a hawk, trying to make her crack before he reveals whatever it is he already knows.

But for the life of her, she has no idea *what* he knows.

Patty is lost.

She hasn’t even *seen* Mrs. Marks since last Easter, when the woman showed up to service in a dress so short the reverend had asked her to leave.

Mrs. Marks doesn’t linger at the grocer’s like the other wives, doesn’t attend the parish meetings or bake sales.

She floats around town like a scandal, and Patty has long assumed Tom’s contempt for her was immovable.

There’s no way, *no way*, he could have anything on her.

And yet, her nerves begin to prickle all the same.

“Oh, nothing much,” he says lightly, too lightly. “I’m sure it’s just silly.” He smiles without warmth. “Only something about our Neil.”

Her stomach flips. A small, panicked flutter takes hold of her heart.

“What about him?”

“She mentioned that Henley Hall is putting on a production. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.” His voice is almost lazy now, deliberate. “You know… that charming little place that puts on those frivolous teenage plays.”

A cold weight settles in her chest.

Oh God. He *knows*.

But how?

“And it’s funny,” Tom goes on, drawing out each word, “she seems to think Neil has the main part. Lizzy apparently won’t stop gushing about how *fantastic* he is.”

Patty’s breath catches. Of course. Lizzy Marks… Mrs. Marks’ daughter. How could she have forgotten. The girl had been in Sunday school with Neil as a child. Shel was always performing, she had been the lead in the nativity after all.

So *she* was in the play.

How hadn’t she accounted for other kids Neil’s age being in the production?

She should have known that gossip would circle back.

Mrs. Marks never missed a chance to brag about her Lizzy being the next Marilyn Monroe.

“The main… a play?” Patty says, forcing a small, brittle laugh, trying her best to sound casual. “That must be a mistake.”

Tom’s smile fades.

The calm slips.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Patricia.”

His voice cracks through the room like a whip.

He’s on her in seconds, fury blooming fast and ugly.

“Women talk. Mrs. Danburry told her you were going to sit together, right in the front row. Tell me, Patty… have you lost your mind?”

Patty steps back instinctively as he advances, his shadow swallowing hers.

He would never hit her… never…

But *would* he?

His rage right now was enough to make her panic.

“My dear...” She pleads.

He slams his fist against the wall beside her head.

The sound makes her jump, tears welling instantly in her eyes.

She shakes, covers her face.

“Why would you lie to me? Do our vows mean nothing to you?”

“Tom… you have to calm down. I think he just… he wanted to-”

“I got off the phone with Mr. Nolan when I got back!” he roars. “He told me I had signed the form agreeing for him to be in the play. Did you know about this?”

“My dear, I-”

Another blow to the wall. The picture frames rattle.

She starts to cry in earnest now, her whole body trembling.

“Did you *know* about this?” he screams again, his face inches from hers.

“I didn’t! He never *told* me! Mrs. Danburry just let it slip...”

She thought this information would help, would dilute his fury, but it serves to just fuel it further.

“And you didn’t think to tell me? You didn’t think to tell the head of this household that his son has lied to him? Has deceived him?”

She forces her voice into a pleading softness, desperate to soothe him. “I didn’t want to upset you, dear. You work so hard, and...”

“Enough,” he snarls. “Enough lies, Patricia. I will *not* stand for this.”

He paces, hands gripping his head, words spilling out faster, darker.

“My boy will not do feminine things like this! He’s our only hope, Patricia. Our only chance at a comfortable retirement. I’ve worked too hard for this family to be laid off and for Neil to go shoot some…some *queer* fest.”

For a moment, Patty forgets how to breathe.

The words hit her like a slap, sharp, filthy, echoing in the stillness of the room.

How could he say such things?

How could he *even think* them?

And yet… God help her… the thought that flashes through her mind isn’t pure outrage.

It’s fear.

Because what if Tom isn’t just being cruel?

What if he’s *noticed* something she’s tried so hard not to see?

“Is that what you want? Our boy. A *fairy*?” he snarls, the word tearing from his throat like something diseased.

Her throat burns. She presses a trembling hand to the hollow of it, as though she could hold the sound in, or maybe stop the panic rising inside her.

She hates the word, the meaning behind it, hates how easily he spits it out, but it lands somewhere deep, sour and familiar.

Because she’s… it’s not like she hasn’t suspected anything of the sort.

It’s not like she hasn’t wondered, quietly, guiltily, pondering over moments she’s never dared to name.

And yet… Neil is *her baby.* Her sweet, gentle boy.

Whatever Tom is implying, whatever he’s trying to make of it, he’s twisting something pure into something ugly.

“Tom…” she starts, but her voice catches on the name.

She doesn’t know what she means to say, doesn’t even know which side of herself she’s speaking from.

“It’s just a school play, dear,” she manages, voice barely steady, soft, careful, the tone one uses for a cornered animal. “And he is the *male* lead, I’m sure he...”

“He is a future *doctor*!” Tom explodes, his voice reverberating off the walls.

He jabs a finger toward her, the motion sharp and accusing.

“Future doctors don’t *prance* across a stage.”

Her stomach twists. She looks away, not trusting herself to speak.

“But surely Harvard would see it as...”

“Harvard wants serious *men* in their medicine program!” he snaps, cutting her off.

His pacing grows faster, more erratic, his shadow dragging long across the carpet. “All his extracurriculars should be geared toward that!”

He stops suddenly, turning back to her, his eyes bloodshot, glinting. “Why would he even *want* to do this?”

Patty can see his hands shaking now, not just from anger, but something more primal: fear, humiliation, the horror of losing control.

It terrifies her more than the rage.

“Tom,” she whispers, taking a cautious step forward, “I’m sure he just… he wanted to feel proud of himself. To do something that made him happy.”

“Happy?” Tom spits the word like it’s poison. “*Happiness* doesn’t put food on the table, Patricia. It doesn’t get a man into Harvard. It doesn’t save his family from ruin!”

He’s shouting again, but his voice cracks this time and the sound of it is worse than the fury.

“Does he want to kill me, Patricia? Does he want me to have a *heart*

attack?"

Patty can't bring herself to answer.

Her tears blur the edges of his face, and for the first time she sees just how frightened he looks beneath the rage… how tightly he clings to control that's already slipping through his fingers.

"He will not make a fool of us," Tom growls, his voice low but trembling with fury. "He will not make a fool of our name. I'm going there, Patty. To Welton. He needs to know I will not accept this. Not any of it."

The words hang in the air like smoke, thick and choking.

Patty feels her stomach drop.

Something in the way he says it, the way his fingers grip the chair until the wood groans, tells her this isn't just about a play.

It never *really* was.

Tom's face is blotched red, his jaw trembling, but underneath the anger there's something colder, fear, maybe. Shame.

That particular horror he feels whenever Neil does something that doesn't fit his idea of a Perry man.

Patty's fingers twist in the hem of her cardigan. She knows this side of him too well, his disgust at tenderness, at gentleness.

His contempt for softness.

And deep down, she's always known… or at least suspected… that Neil might be *different*.

He's never spoken about girls. Not the way other boys do. Not with teasing or curiosity or that clumsy pride Tom expects.

A memory surfaces unbidden.

Neil, five years old, sitting cross-legged on the living room carpet.

His face had glowed as he chattered about a boy from school, about his hair, his smile, how he wanted to *marry* him.

Patty had laughed too quickly, her heart leaping into her throat.

"Boys don't marry boys, sweetie," she'd said, smoothing his hair, trying to turn it into a joke.

But Neil had looked up at her with those wide, guileless eyes. *"Why not, Mommy?"*

Her hand had stilled in his hair. The air had gone still around them, too tight, too bright.

Because if Tom ever heard something like that…

She'd panicked.

"*They just can't,*" she'd snapped, sharper, meaner, than she meant to.

Then she'd swallowed hard, sent him to wash up for dinner, and prayed he wouldn't repeat it in front of Tom.

But the look in Neil's eyes has haunted her ever since.

It's a look she's tried and failed to forget, those huge innocent brown eyes, the dawning realisation in them.

The way he'd gone so quiet after. Confusion and fear in equal measure.

He'd never mentioned that boy again. He'd never mentioned *any* boys.

Any friends really, not unless she brought them up first.

If a few careless words from her had been enough to floor him… what would *Tom's* words be capable of?

"Tom… just *please* go easy on him. Don't get too mad."

He straightens as if at a rebuke, the briefest flinch of hurt at her words, not real sorrow so much as wounded pride.

For a second his face softens into a look that could be read as annoyance at being thought unkind, an almost-petulant lift of the chin, and then the armor folds back in.

His voice settles, flat and controlled, each word measured like a verdict.

"I'm a reasonable man, Patricia. I'll just tell him straight. He can't do

it. He will not do the play. There will be dire consequences if he disobeys me again."

There's no use. He'll do whatever he thinks best. Patty has no power.

She watches helplessly as he leaves, as she hears his car drive off.

She cleans the house, less from necessity than from a desperate need to keep moving, to turn her fear into something she can control.

All the while she thinks of her sweet boy, of how hard he tries to be everything they expect of him.

When Tom finally returns, it's gone nine.

Patty's been watching the clock for hours, her nerves winding tighter with each slow tick.

She had even considered breaking into Tom's supply of cigars to calm her nerves, but thought better of it.

He'd definitely notice.

She tells herself it's silly to worry, that he's probably just spoken with Neil, maybe even stopped at the bar on the way back, but something about the silence in the house feels eery.

The moment the car pulls into the drive, her heart stumbles.

He steps through the door without a word, face unreadable, his coat still dusted with frost.

He doesn't even glance her way, just sets his coat and briefcase down with a dull thud and heads straight for his office, closing the door behind him.

The sound of it, that quiet, decisive click, echoes through the hall.

Patty stands there for a long time, unsure whether to follow or flee.

Eventually, she forces herself to tidy the kitchen, anything to keep her hands busy, her mind from turning over the possibilities.

When the clock strikes eleven, she's halfway up the stairs to get ready for bed when she hears his voice, low, deliberate, drifting from behind the office door.

"So you have a place? Swell. No, no...it's not confirmed yet. But tomorrow I'll let you know. Yes, that's all for now."

A place? Who is he talking to? Patty knocks, her hand trembling.

"Come in, dear."

As she enters, Tom sits staring out the window.

"Who were you just speaking to?" she asks carefully.

"Nothing you should worry yourself with, dear. Just a backup. You know... just in case."

"A backup?" She frowns. "Is it… for a job?"

Mr. Perry doesn't answer. He simply walks to his desk drawer, places some papers inside, and closes it.

"I'm going to retire to bed. It's been a long day."

"How… how did it go with Neil?"

Tom stiffens. "He will listen. He knows what's good for him."

She isn't sure what to make of that.

She can't imagine Neil agreeing to give up the play without a fight. But perhaps... perhaps he had a change of heart.

"So he's dropping out?"

Tom smiles, but there's no warmth. "Of course he will. But if he doesn't… let's just say arrangements have been made."

Without another word, he leaves, closing the door behind him. Patty stands there, speechless.

Whatever it is Tom has arranged… it doesn't sound good.

Neil had already gone out of his way to hide this from them, to defy his father's wishes. Patty doesn't believe for a second that he'll give it up now.

But whatever Tom has planned… she has to warn him.

He can't do the play. The consequences are too dire.

Before she can think twice, Patty bolts for the front door. Quietly, precisely, she locks it behind her and runs.

She runs faster than she has in years, her fear carrying her down the empty streets. If anyone saw her like this, she'd be the talk of the town, but at this hour, every light is out.

By the time she reaches Welton, she's completely out of breath. The night warden looks at her as though she's mad, but when she says her son's name, *Neil Perry*, and that she needs to speak to him urgently, he takes pity. She's given ten minutes.

It's enough. Ten minutes is all she needs.

When Neil opens the door, she's struck by his appearance, just as dishevelled as she feared.

His eyes are red and raw, his hair sticking out in every direction. All signs that Tom's words cut deep.

And yet...there's something in his expression. A glint of something… happiness? Joy?

Behind him stands his roommate, who Patty assumes must be Todd, looking just as startled, yet with that same quiet glow to him.

Hmm.

Peculiar…

But…

There's no time to dwell.

"Mother?" Neil's expression folds into confusion. She supposes that's fair. He rarely sees her without Tom by her side.

“Neil,” she begins, then glances at the other boy. “I need to speak with you a moment. Alone.”

Neil looks uncertain, but turns to his roommate. “Todd… would you mind? Just for a moment?”

Todd nods. As he passes, Patty notices him give Neil’s hand a brief, gentle squeeze. It’s tender. *Too* tender.

It doesn’t feel like it’s for her eyes.

When the door closes, she can’t hold it in any longer. A sob escapes.

“What’s wrong, Mom?”

Now that she’s here, she isn’t sure how to say it. It feels foolish, hysterical...but she has to try.

“You can’t do the play.”

Neil’s face falls. “What? I…Mom, I already told Father I wasn’t going to...”

“I don’t believe you.” Her voice is firmer than she’s ever heard it, even to herself. “I don’t believe you won’t.”

He watches her warily as she goes on.

“You can’t do it. I wish you could. It must’ve meant so much to you, to lie to your father like that. But he won’t let this go. It’s not just about the play, Neil.”

He frowns. “What are you saying, Mother?”

“I’m saying, if you do it, I think the consequences will be *worse* than you imagine.”

A silence stretches.

“He sees the play as the manifestation of the traits in you he finds undesirable,” she says softly. “Your kindness. Your sensitivity. The way you care so deeply for others. He sees it as weakness.”

She thinks again of the hand squeeze, of the look in Todd Anderson’s eyes, and though she can’t even name it, she knows.

“I love you, Neil. But you need to do as he says. Promise me.”

The words seem to land. He seems to understand what she's getting at.

God help her, there's that look again.

That helpless wounded look.

It hurts her, it destroys her to do this to him.

But it's necessary.

Neil's voice is small. "Of course. Of course I do."

Patty isn't convinced.

But it's all she can do.

"I'd best be off," she says, clearing her throat, wiping her eyes.

She doesn't hug him, she can't.

If she does she would change her mind.

Instead she straightens her clothes and leaves.

She can only hope she's done enough.

That she's protected him.

But as she turns the lock on the front door, as she slides back into bed and stares at the dark ceiling, the gnawing in her chest won't quiet.

Because she knows.

There's not a doubt in her mind.

Neil will do the play tomorrow.

And whatever Tom has planned, she won't be able to stop it.

As always, she is entirely, helplessly useless.

Chapter End Notes

Sowwwy my angsty side is really coming out lately but it'll be worth it I promise.

P.S. I've also been drafting my modern AU (I'm nowhere near releasing this) and the prologue alone has already made ME cry. So, hope that sells it to anyone interested in reading :3

Chapter 29: Chapter 29.

Chapter Notes

Did you guys miss a Charlie POV as much as I did?

This chapter was inspired by the fact I forgot they were meant to have a DPS meeting that evening so quick interlude before some Todd chapters <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie.

“I don’t think they’re coming, guys,” Knox huffs, folding his arms. “We should just get started.”

It’s well past midnight, and the cave feels almost too big with just five boys sitting around.

Candlelight throws unsteady shadows over the stone walls, flickering orange and gold across their faces.

Breath fogs in the cold; the air smells of smoke, wax, and wet earth.

Charlie exhales a plume of smoke, watching it twist toward the cave roof. The longer they wait, the more it feels like even the air is holding its breath. With the snowfall starting outside, it’s about twice as cold as normal.

They’re all shivering openly.

They’ve been waiting at least an hour, and if Charlie didn’t know the potential reason for Neil and Todd’s absence, he’d have marched straight to their rooms, knocked their heads together, and dragged them here himself.

But tonight’s different. Delicate.

He has no clue what state either of them might be in.

“Knoxious is right, kiddos. Best get this show on the road! Who’s first up?” Charlie adds.

“But Neil has the book!” Cameron blurts, as if that helps anything.

Jeez…Does he think the rest of them are blind?

Charlie rolls his eyes. “Screw the book. We’ve got our sweet, artistic minds, Richie Rich.”

Before Cameron can fire back, Charlie lunges across the circle and ruffles his perfectly parted hair with both hands.

The movement’s exaggerated, playful, but there’s something satisfying about it. The way Cameron shrieks like a startled cat and swats him away, fumbling for his comb.

“Jesus, Dalton! I just shampooed this!”

Charlie grins, utterly unrepentant. “Yeah, and it shows. Real shiny, Cammy. Maybe the bats’ll mistake it for a beacon.”

Cameron glares, smoothing his hair furiously in the candlelight, muttering something about “juvenile behaviour.”

“Oh, stop acting like children, the two of you!” Meeks groans, though there’s laughter under it.

Charlie flips him off. “You love it.”

“We should wait a little longer,” Pitts says, ever the optimist. “Surely they haven’t forgotten?”

Knox sighs. “I really don’t think they’re coming. Neil’s always so… well, not *late*, but Todd...” He trails off, catching himself.

Because everyone knows.

Todd goes wherever Neil does.

Charlie knows too...and he’s the only one here who might have an idea *why* Neil isn’t showing up tonight.

Mr. Perry’s surprise visit. … *something bad was brewing.*

He doesn’t know what happened after, but he can imagine.

He’s seen the man’s temper enough times already.

He has an idea of what was said.

He doesn't need to hear the exact words.

Still, the unease prickles up the back of his neck.

He won't show it, though.

Not here.

Not now.

The last thing they need is everyone panicking and storming up to Welton in the middle of the night.

They'd mean well…but they'd make everything worse.

And he's scared for Neil.

He's *really* scared.

But he'll never admit as much.

So he does what he always does.

He covers the worry with noise.

Charlie cups his hands around his mouth and lets out a thunderous yawp that echoes through the cave.

Everyone jumps…Cameron almost drops his candle, Knox yelps, and Meeks curses loud enough to wake the dead.

Charlie grins, pleased with himself.

"Just making sure you were all awake. Man, I should be in Neil's next play. I'd *kill* as the hot bad guy. Shakespeare wrote one of those, right?"

"Pretty sure they all die," Pitts says, deadpan.

"Then I'd die *handsomely*."

A few weak laughs ripple around, but the energy feels thinner now.

Charlie clears his throat and starts reciting the poem he memorised this week.

He'd been hoping Todd would be here to hear it; Todd always looked so genuinely delighted whenever Charlie bothered to act like poetry

mattered. When Charlie showed any ounce of sincerity when it came to prose.

"From childhood's hour I have not been

As others were...I have not seen

As others saw...I could not bring

My passions from a common spring..."

Meeks chokes back a laugh of disbelief. "Is that *fucking Poe*?"

Before Charlie can answer, Pitts reaches over, covers Meeks's mouth, and leans in close. VERY close and whispers, "Let him finish Meeksie!"

Meeks freezes, eyes wide, and the two of them lock eyes for a beat too long before Pitts awkwardly drops his hand.

Meeks goes pink, mumbling something into his sleeve.

Charlie raises an eyebrow.

Well… that was *interesting*.

He files it away for later, not the time to process his friends' relationship mid-poem.

"From the same source I have not taken

My sorrow...I could not awaken

My heart to joy at the same tone...

And all I lov'd...I lov'd alone..."

As Charlie recites the rest of the poem, the words echo against the stone, a little hollow, a little haunting.

Charlie hadn't even heard of Edgar Allan Poe until the day they'd been

having a class discussion about themes in poetry.

He'd been bored out of his mind, sick of hearing about romance and heartbreak and all that melodrama.

He'd said as much during the discussion, scoffing.

"*Come on, sir… poems are all mushy crap. Where's the blood? The rage*?"

Any other professor would have given him a demerit and a week's detention for the comment, but Keating had only looked amused and moved past it quickly.

Later, as the boys had filed out, he'd stopped Charlie.

"*Stay back a moment, Mr. Dalton. I have something for you.*"

Charlie had watched as Keating rummaged through his desk drawer, through that little personal library of his, and pulled out a thick anthology with an illustration of a raven on the cover.

"*What on God's green earth is this, Captain*?"

Keating's eyes had twinkled as he handed it over. "*You know. Blood, rage, horrors. But be warned, son, it still has its fair share of sentimentality*."

Charlie had stared at him, wide-eyed and taken aback.

Keating had only smiled that small, knowing smile of his. "*There's something for everyone, Mr. Dalton*."

He hadn't quite believed Keating then. But now, in the cold half-light, it makes more sense.

The poem feels almost too close to the bone, like he's confessing something without meaning to.

He finishes softly. Feeling suddenly extremely exposed as he watches his friends eyes on him.

"From the thunder, and the storm...

And the cloud that took the form

(When the rest of Heaven was blue)

Of a demon in my view…"

For a few seconds, no one says a word.

Silence hangs heavy in the cave.

Somewhere in the tunnel beyond, water drips steadily.

Finally, Knox mutters, "Man, that's dark."

"'Tis life, dear Knoxy boy!" Charlie grins, taking an exaggerated bow as Meeks and Pitts applaud.

Cameron and Knox exchange uncertain looks, somewhere between admiration and concern.

Before Charlie can say another word, footsteps echo softly from the tunnel mouth.

Tentative.

Hesitant.

Only one person Charlie knows walks that way.

"Anderson?" Charlie calls out.

All the poets turn toward the entrance and as Charlie suspected, Todd steps out of the shadows, shoulders hunched, looking faintly embarrassed to be caught lingering.

"Sorry, guys. I'm…uh…sorry I'm late."

"Where's Neil?" Knox asks immediately.

"Oh… he's just…" Todd hesitates. "Nerves for tomorrow. He wanted an early night."

Charlie knows it's a lie. Knows it from a mile off.

But he also knows Todd well enough to recognize that he's protecting Neil, not hiding something for himself.

"Well, come on innnn, handsome!" Charlie claps him on the back,

grinning wide as he presses a cigar into Todd's hand. Todd gives a small, grateful smile and takes it, lowering himself onto the ground beside Meeks.

Meeks leans in to light the cigar for him. The glow flares briefly across Todd's face ... pink cheeks, faint shadows under his eyes, a softness to his expression that catches Charlie off guard.

There's worry there, yes ... but also something else.

A quiet sort of joy.

A warmth that has nothing to do with the fire.

Charlie doesn't need to ask who's responsible.

Todd's moods have always orbited Neil Perry like the moon to its tide.

"So, Anderson!" Charlie exhales a plume of smoke, his grin half-daring, half-affectionate. "You gonna treat us to one of your works of art tonight?"

Todd shoots him a sharp look over the cigar.

Charlie feels his smile widen at that look.

A few months ago, Anderson wouldn't even have dared to meet his eyes, too afraid, maybe, of being noticed, of being *read.*

Now, though? He's starting to hold his own.

That quiet steel beneath the shyness is showing more and more.

The sappy side of Charlie feels almost proud of him for it, the kid's come a long way since that first night in the cave.

Even if he is glaring at him like he wants to set him on fire.

He'd still rather that than the old Todd, the one who'd stare at his shoes and mumble till someone bailed him out.

"Nuwanda, he doesn't have to—" Knox begins, ever the peacemaker, but Todd cuts him off gently.

"No, it's okay. I did promise."

He says it softly, but there's something steadier in his tone now, a

quiet sort of resolve that hushes the room more effectively than any of Charlie's grand speeches ever could.

Charlie feels pride swell somewhere deep in his chest.

Todd Anderson.

Who'd have thought?

A few months ago, the kid could barely look them in the eye, shrinking into himself every time someone so much as said his name.

Now here he is, standing up, *offering* to read.

The rest of them are loud without even trying.

Knox, with his endless rambling about Chris.

Pitts and Meeks, talking in circles about inventions.

Charlie, running his mouth just to see who'll bite back.

Cameron, with his constant nagging.

Neil, with his endless motivating.

But Todd… Todd has to *work* for every word.

It costs him something to speak, to be seen.

And maybe that's what Charlie admires most, that the kid keeps doing it anyway.

He doesn't know much about Todd's home life, though something in the boy's silences tells him enough.

The kind of quiet that doesn't come from shyness alone.

Charlie recognises it; it's the kind that's been taught.

He glances at him now, this quiet poet who somehow stumbled into their mad little brotherhood, and feels that same tug he feels with Neil sometimes, that instinct to look out for them, to keep the bastards of the world at bay a little longer.

Not that he'd ever *say* that.

Christ, no.

He'd never live it down.

Todd stands, fumbling briefly in his pocket before drawing out a small folded piece of paper.

His hands tremble just slightly as he unfolds it.

"This one's called… *Reborn*."

The fire pops. Smoke curls toward the ceiling as Todd begins to read.

"As the wolves tore at my skin,

Ripping me from limb to limb..."

It's a typical Todd Anderson original, rife with metaphor, thick with melancholy.

The words fall softly from his tongue, hesitant at first, then gathering rhythm. Around the firelight, the other boys grow still, drawn in despite themselves.

Even through Todd's nervous delivery, his voice trembles with something real.

Something raw.

That's the thing about Todd's poems, they don't just *speak*, they *transpire*, as if every line seeps out of him and somehow finds its way into whoever's listening.

Each of them hears something different, a private ache reflected back.

But Charlie… Charlie hears *him*.

He can see Todd's meaning clear as day: the loneliness, the constant battle between fear and want.

The way Neil had drawn him out of himself, rescued him, even.

And how, in his quiet way, Todd would do anything to save Neil right back.

It hits Charlie harder than he expects.

God, it's moving.

It's what he's always wanted for Neil, someone who *understands* him.

Who loves him with the same ferocity Charlie does, only deeper, surer, in a way Charlie never could.

Todd's voice wavers through the last lines:

"My very core, my evensong,

My life, my love, my only one.

You're mine forevermore."

When he finishes, Todd looks flushed to the ears, the paper trembling faintly in his hands.

Those final words hang in the cave like smoke, impossible to ignore.

Charlie glances around.

Knox meets his eye, eyebrows raised, and they both stifle a laugh, not mocking, but almost incredulous.

Who would've thought the quietest of them all would write the most *revealing* love poem?

Pitts and Meeks exchange a quick look too, wide-eyed, before immediately looking away, finding something fascinating on the cave floor.

Charlie bites the inside of his cheek, making a mental note.

Christ, when did he become the resident love expert?

Surrounded by poets and pining fools, he's destined to drown in the stuff.

Then his gaze lands on Cameron.

Cameron is frowning, not disapproving, exactly, but curious, his head

tilted as if he's solving a riddle.

"Who's that about?" he asks at last, perfectly straight-faced.

Fuck. Of course the guy wouldn't be *subtle* about it but jeez Charlie could kick him.

Have some *tact* Cameron.

Todd's colour deepens to scarlet. "Uh, um… nobody. It's, it's just general."

It's not convincing, not even close. Cameron seems to know it too, though to his credit, he just nods once and looks down at his shoes.

Charlie studies him carefully.

For all his rigidity and rules, Cameron isn't an idiot.

He's sharp , irritatingly so. If anyone else could piece it together, it'd be him.

And yet… Charlie isn't sure what he'd *do* with that knowledge.

Cameron's a stickler for the handbook, but he's not heartless. At least… Charlie hopes he's not.

Maybe he'd keep it to himself.

Maybe he wouldn't.

Either way, if he didn't,

Well. He'd have *Charlie Dalton* to answer to.

Charlie, as usual, is the one to break through the following silence.

He starts clapping. Loud, theatrical, over the top, and Knox joins in, grinning.

Within seconds, the whole cave echoes with applause, even Cameron's giving a few stiff pats of approval.

Todd ducks his head, mumbling something about how it's nothing, how it doesn't even rhyme properly. His cheeks are pink, his words tumbling over themselves. He needn't bother.

They all adore him.

He's wormed his way into their strange little brotherhood like he was always meant to be there.

Charlie sees it clear as day.

That quiet loyalty, the soft heart, the way he listens, it's all Neil's influence, sure, but also just Todd being Todd.

As always, Neil's managed to bring people together. He's the glue, even when he isn't here.

Charlie only hopes Todd knows it, knows that even without Neil, he isn't alone. That he's one of *them* now.

God help me, Charlie thinks, *I really am a sap*.

They carry on as usual after that, the laughter and chatter slowly creeping back in.

Still, there's a weight to the night that even Charlie can't joke away.

Neil's absence hangs in the air like the smoke from their cigars, impossible to ignore, lingering long after the embers start to fade.

Eventually, they pack up.

Books, cigars, matches. The cave grows quiet again, the fire dying low.

As the boys start to file out, Charlie reaches out and taps Todd's shoulder.

When Todd glances over, Charlie gives him a look, a small tilt of the head that says *hang back a second.*

Todd nods, and when Knox looks back questioningly, Charlie shoots another look, one that hopefully says *I'll fill you in later, relax jackass.*

Knox rolls his eyes, grins, and trudges out with the others.

Soon it's just the two of them, silhouettes in the flickering firelight.

Their breath clouds in the cool night air.

Charlie waits until the rest are nothing more than shadows moving up

the path before turning back to Todd.

“So…” He leans against the cave wall, voice casual but eyes sharp. “What’d Mr. P say to Neil?”

Todd exhales, a sound halfway between relief and exhaustion.

Finally, someone he can speak openly to. Someone who understands Neil without him having to explain every inch of it.

“He… you know what he’s like.” Todd’s voice is low, defeated. “Told Neil he can’t do the play. Wouldn’t listen to him. Wouldn’t even let him talk.”

Charlie grunts, the sound rough and disbelieving.

Of course.

He shouldn’t be surprised that man never once gave Neil a break.

Still, a part of him had *hoped* this time might be different, that maybe the bastard would at least let him perform the opening night.

But no.

Same old story.

Same old iron wall.

“Ah, shit,” he mutters. “I bet Neil was devastated.”

Todd nods grimly. “Yeah. He’d been crying.” He bites his lip, hesitates, like he’s choosing his next words carefully.

“He, uh… he was on the docks alone. That’s why neither of us came by for the meeting. We were…there.”

Charlie smirks, taking the chance to be a dipshit amidst the seriousness of the moment. It’s what he does best, after all.

“Oh. On the docks, huh? In the snow? Alone… at night…”

“Yeah…” Todd shoots him a glare, but Charlie just laughs, that grin spreading.

“For that long?” he teases. “Just talking?”

Todd's face turns crimson. He looks down, smiling despite himself. "Oh, don't look at me like that," he mutters, half-laughing as he swats at Charlie's shoulder. "Yes, we did… we just, uh, talked. He's gonna do it anyway."

Charlie wants to tease him again, the joke's right there on the tip of his tongue, but something in Todd's tone stops him.

There's more to the story. He can see it in the way Todd's face catches the candlelight, nervous but steady, lit with something that wasn't there before.

Whatever happened out there, it did Neil good. And that's all Charlie needs to know.

He doesn't need the details.

He doesn't want them.

It's enough to see that look on Todd's face.

That the same look he sees in Neil's when he talks about being on stage.

Hell, Charlie's always been Neil's self-appointed brother, but if there's anyone he'd trust to take care of him, really take care of him, it's Todd Anderson.

Quiet, loyal, and good-hearted to the bone.

Still… Neil skipping the meeting after all that can't be a good sign. Something must've gone wrong.

"Todd, that's," Charlie's voice softens. "That's great. But… why's he still not here, then?"

Todd's smile fades. That small, pleased glow disappears as his concern returns full force.

"Oh… well, a little while after we got back to the room, Mrs. Perry showed up." Todd frowns, brow creasing. "I'm not sure what she wanted, but she looked panicked."

Charlie's jaw drops. "*Mrs. P?* Are you sure?"

The image doesn't compute. The woman's terrified of her own shadow. What on earth is she doing at Welton past curfew on a

Thursday night?

Todd shrugs. “It surprised Neil too. I guess Mr. Perry’s temper came home with him. Maybe she just wanted to check he’s okay?”

Charlie nods slowly, but doubt curls through him like smoke.

Mrs. Perry showing up in person?

No way.

If she were worried, she’d have called the next morning, and even that would’ve been rare.

Charlie's mother often said she thought Mr. Perry tapped the phone line.

Patty never called her much, and when she did, his Mom said she always sounded like she was reading from a script.

Mrs. Dalton and Patty Perry had been childhood friends.

Charlie remembers his mother confiding in him one evening, her voice low as though the walls might be listening.

She said she worried Tom Perry was cruel to Patty, maybe even worse than cruel.

He hadn’t known what to say at the time, just that it scared him to hear it. Scared him for Neil too.

His father had overheard, of course. He’d stepped into the room halfway through and laughed them both out of it.

“The woman’s merely a loyal wife, Debbie. No need to dramatize the situation , particularly in front of our boy.”

Charlie remembers the sting of that, his father making it sound shameful to care.

His mother had merely sighed in acceptance and continued to cook them dinner.

But the conversation had stuck with Charlie all these years.

His fathers words ringing louder than the rest.

Maybe cruelty was just a reflex fathers developed when their sons stopped being small enough to scare. Charlie knows it well enough; he's been hit enough times to recognize bitterness when he sees it.

Mr. Dalton wasn't a kind man. Not even close.

But Mr. Perry… he's something else entirely.

The kind of man whose control runs bone-deep.

Charlie's a shithead. A troublemaker. Part of him even understands his own father's contempt.

But Neil? Wonderful, kind, brilliant, hardworking, *perfect* Neil?

The kid who glows even in the dark. The joy of Charlie's life.

How could anyone look at that and choose to crush it?

Mr. Perry was sick in the head. If Patty had rushed to Welton… if she'd been that distressed… God knows what Tom Perry has planned.

He can't help it.

Can't hide it any longer.

Can't mask it.

He begins to cry.

He should be humiliated.

He should be hiding this side of himself from Todd.

Normally, he'd deflect, laugh it off, crack a joke, turn it into something loud and stupid.

But somehow, in Todd's company, it feels like crying might actually be okay.

He just feels so sick with fear.

It's been heavy, carrying the knowledge of what's really between Todd and Neil, the fear of others using it against them.

The fear of saying the wrong thing, of not being a good enough friend to either of them.

Of failing to protect them.

It's been heavier still knowing Neil so deeply, so well, that he can see what no one else can: how vulnerable he truly is.

How burdened.

How much of a grip Mr. Perry truly has on him.

By the look on his face, Charlie can see Todd is completely taken aback by the tears. But he's only frozen for a moment before he steps forward and pulls Charlie into a tight embrace.

"Oh, Charlie." His voice is soft, kind, careful. "It's okay. He's gonna be okay."

"Todd…" Charlie's voice cracks a little. He can't help it. "I'm *worried*."

Todd pulls back just enough to look at him, really look at him, and for a moment, something unspoken passes between them.

The thread that ties them both to Neil's soul so inexplicably.

The dread neither can name, but both can feel clawing closer.

He can't explain it. Doesn't know what exactly he's afraid of. Just that it's *bad*.

Todd swallows hard, trying to keep steady. "Charlie. You know more than anyone that he has to do this. We *can* protect him. Between the two of us, remember? Mr. Perry doesn't need to find out, right?"

Charlie stares at him, that uneasy feeling still gnawing in his chest.

He wants to believe Todd.

Wants to trust in Neil's stubbornness, in his joy, in the sheer, impossible brightness that's always carried them all.

But for the first time, he isn't sure that'll be enough.

"Yeah… of course," he says, forcing a smile until Todd looks reassured. Then he glances toward the cave mouth.

The candles are burning low now, wax pooling across the rocks.

Outside, the snow keeps falling, soft and soundless.

He tells himself it’s just the cold that makes him shiver.

Chapter End Notes

I have a busy week ahead so forgive me if the next few chapters take a little longer. <3

Chapter 30: Chapter 30.

Chapter Notes

A little reprieve before some very plot-heavy elements.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd.

When Todd slips back into the dorm, he's half afraid Neil will be gone, that he'll have left with his mother after all.

The sight that greets him doesn't bring much comfort either.

Neil sits on the edge of his bed, head buried in his hands.

The lamplight halos him, but there's no warmth in it.

Todd's heart stutters.

"*Neil*?" He whispers.

When those brown eyes, the ones he adores so much, flick up to meet his, Todd feels his heart twist.

Neil looks stricken.

Haunted.

Like something has been hollowed out of him.

What on earth has his mother said to him?

Todd crosses the room slowly, unsure whether to speak again. He kneels at Neil's feet, looks up helplessly.

Neil doesn't move.

He doesn't even blink.

He just stares at some fixed point past Todd's shoulder.

"Neil…what's happened?"

Neil shakes his head, sits a little straighter. “It’s nothing. Just a repeat of what my father said. The same thing over and over again. I can’t do the play.”

His voice is too calm, too deliberate, the kind of tone someone uses to keep from shaking apart.

Todd hesitates. “But… you *can*, can’t you? You said that you'd...”

“I *said* I’m doing it.” Neil cuts him off, sharper than he seemed to mean to.

Then, quieter, almost to himself, “This doesn’t change anything. I’m doing it. No matter what.”

The words are fierce, defiant, but they don’t sound like victory.

They sound like someone drawing a line in the sand and knowing the tide will come anyway.

Todd flinches at the tone, though he knows it isn’t really for him.

Still, something in Neil’s voice makes his stomach twist.

There’s a weight there that feels bigger than the play, heavier than his father’s disapproval.

Something else is wrong.

He can’t shake the creeping fear that maybe…maybe it’s *them*.

Maybe Neil’s regretting what’s been transpiring between them.

The way they’ve started to blur the edges of friendship, the touches that linger too long, the glances that say too much.

Out on the docks, the almost-kiss, Neil’s breath on his cheek.

The way Neil had asked him to dance, had smiled like he meant it.

The way Todd’s heart had been racing so hard he thought he might drown in it.

The cheek kiss, the look in Neil’s eyes when he’d pulled away… the *hunger* in it.

And then the embrace in their room, the look that passed between

them before his mother interrupted, that strange, delicate miracle of being seen.

To Todd, it had all felt real.

Realer than anything he's ever felt.

What if Neil doesn't see it that way now?

What if he's realised Todd's love isn't worth the risk?

That the cost of wanting him is too high.

Todd's chest aches with it, the possibility that all of this, this hope, this closeness, could vanish before it's even really begun.

He doesn't know how to act.

What to say.

He wants to reach out, to touch Neil's shoulder, to offer something, anything, but fear stops him.

What if Neil recoils?

Having come this close, having felt Neil's warmth and laughter and trust, the idea of losing it feels unbearable.

But Neil isn't cruel.

Todd *knows* that.

He's not the kind of person who would let someone believe in something false.

So Todd takes a breath and lets his hand hover, just a small, trembling motion in the space between them, and then he places it delicately, deliberately on Neil's knee.

"It…it's gonna be okay…and Neil… you're gonna be *magic* on that stage. I promise." Todd says it quietly enough that it could be missed, but Neil's eyes flick up to meet his.

Whatever was hardened there before seems to melt, replaced by something soft and unbearably tender.

The kind of look that undoes every knot in Todd's chest.

God, he's beautiful.

Even with his eyes rimmed red and his face shadowed with exhaustion, he's *so* beautiful.

Todd feels like he might die just from staring at him.

Just from having Neil's eyes on him.

If this is all I get, Todd thinks, *if I'm only the receiver of that look once, I'll die happy*.

If Neil comes to his senses, realises he can't love a boy, can't love him, it'll hurt.

It'll be painful.

But Neil's magnetic eyes trailing over him now will still feel worth it.

Todd will carry that memory into his old age.

He'll remember Neil's softness, his kindness, for the rest of his days.

He only hopes…

He only hopes Neil will be beside him when he does.

Neil's watching him still, eyes soft in the half-light, as though he knows every thought running through Todd's head.

The corner of his mouth lifts, a quiet, tired smile.

Neil shifts back, so he is laying back on his bed, and pats the space beside him.

"C'mere."

The words are a whisper, rough-edged but still with Neil's usual gentleness.

An invitation, a promise, a plea.

Todd doesn't think, doesn't hesitate. He climbs up beside him.

It feels so right, so natural when Neil pulls him into his arms, holding him close without a flicker of uncertainty.

Todd melts into the embrace, pressing his face to Neil's chest.

He exhales as one of Neil's hands slides into his hair, combing through it with slow, absent-minded strokes.

He feels as though they're suspended in time, as if the world has stopped turning.

Mr. Perry doesn't matter.

Their fears, their doubts, none of it matters.

Right now, it's just them.

This closeness.

This honesty.

This small pocket of truth they've carved out for themselves.

It's a kind of intimacy Todd has never known.

He was never held as a child, rarely hugged.

He's never truly felt like he belonged anywhere.

Certainly not in his family.

As a small boy, he'd often wondered if he'd been a changeling at birth, misplaced, switched with someone who was actually wanted.

It's always felt like it was a mistake that he was put on the Earth, God's singular error.

Worth nothing…well, merely the amount all of cells in the human body were worth.

"*Five Ninety-Eight*," as his father had once cruelly said, "*that's all you'll be worth if you don't make something of yourself.*"

And for the longest time, Todd had believed it.

There are a handful of people who've ever made Todd feel worth more than that.

Who have made him feel like he *matters*.

The Poets, of course.

All of them.

Knox, with his ridiculous, well-meaning heart on his sleeve. Inclusive and kind. Funny and hopeless in the best way.

Meeks, good-natured, always able to see the best in everyone. His humor, his wit, that quiet intelligence most people outside of the cave never got to see. He was the first to extend a hand in greeting to Todd, and Todd will forever be thankful for it.

Pitts, the unassuming yet wonderful soul who always seems to see right through everyone. Blunt in delivery, wicked in humor, and somehow still the sweetest of them all.

Cameron…sure, the guy can be annoying. Todd thinks of the almost kiss he interrupted, *really annoying*. But Todd understands him, in a way. At his best, he's funny, even endearing. It's just a shame he's so caught up in the Welton machine. Still, he accepts Todd now as one of them, and that's more than he ever had before.

And Charlie… what could Todd even begin to say about him? He's become one of Todd's dearest friends, much to his own surprise.

Charlie's fun to be around, witty, dynamic, smarter than he gives himself credit for, and only slightly unbearable (*sometimes*).

But his protective nature runs deep.

His loyalty to Neil, to all of them.

Taking the blame for the Society to protect them.

Punching Max to defend Todd.

Doing anything to make sure Neil's okay.

He thinks of the guy tonight, how he let Todd in.

Allowed him to see his fears.

Showed him his vulnerable side.

A side that Todd suspects he feels the need to conceal more often than not.

Todd feels closer to him than ever now and hopes Charlie feels the same.

There's Keating, of course. The man has shown Todd what he's been

missing all these years, a supportive adult figure.

Someone who *believes* in him.

Who doesn't tell him he's worthless.

Who values his thoughts, who listens to his voice.

Someone who knows who he is.

Knows how he *loves*.

Knows who he wants to be

He not only *accepts* it, but *celebrates* it.

Keating has brought out bravery in Todd that he never even thought existed.

He will forever be grateful to each one of them, who have made being at Welton feel bearable in a way Balincrest never was.

But the boy in his arms, his wonderful Neil…he is Todd's *home*.

His true safe place.

He's never felt like he's belonged anywhere else but in his strong arms.

Against his firm chest.

Without Neil, Todd might have stayed lonely forever, trapped in his shell.

But Neil has lit him from the inside.

Encouraged him.

Pushed him.

Even… even *loved* him.

Loved him… in a way Todd thought he'd never get to have.

Never to love, never know the burn of being loved in return.

His body is firm and warm against Todd's, and Todd thinks: *if this is all I ever get, that's enough.*

It's privilege enough to just touch him once, to be held in his arms even once.

They lie there in comfortable silence for several minutes. Neil never once loosens his hold.

Todd feels safer than he ever has.

"How was the meeting?" Neil asks finally, the low vibration of his voice against Todd's hair almost startling him.

"Y-yeah, it was good. I, uh… I read something."

A confessional, Todd thinks but does not say.

Neil pulls back slightly, joy breaking across his features so bright it could stop Todd's heart.

"Oh, Todd! That's so great. I'm *so* proud of you!"

His gaze is so intense that Todd has to duck his head into Neil's chest, earning a soft laugh that rumbles through both of them.

"Thanks…" Todd murmurs, and Neil's arms tighten around him again.

When Todd melts fully into his embrace, Neil presses a small, gentle kiss to his hairline, barely there, but enough to make Todd shudder.

God, Neil will kill him one of these days.

Todd's debating just diving in, kissing the life out of him, when Neil gives a long, weary yawn.

It's been a long day for poor Neil, facing both his parents, the looming loss of his dream, no *wonder* he looks so spent.

"Let's sleep, okay?" Todd says, reluctant to move but knowing he should.

"Yeah, okay." Neil whispers against his forehead, and Todd shivers at the warmth of his breath.

He starts to move away, but Neil's grip suddenly tightens.

"No. Stay with me. Please."

Neil seems almost panicked, his eyes wet and wide as they meet

Todd's.

"*Please,* I… I can't be alone right now. I really need you. Please."

The words sound desperate, a plea dragged from somewhere deep.

Todd isn't used to being *needed.*

Not used to anyone even wanting him around.

But Neil needs him.

Seeks his comfort.

Wants to hold him all night.

The thought sends a fresh wave of chills down Todd's spine.

How could he ever refuse?

"Okay," he murmurs, stroking Neil's cheek in reassurance. "I'm still in my clothes though… I just need to change."

Neil huffs in protest, his fingers still fisting in the fabric of Todd's sweater.

Todd hesitates, his hand lingering on Neil's face.

Neil's eyes are glassy but fixed on him, as though letting Todd go will break something sacred.

Todd forces a breath, pulling back slowly. "I'll only be a second," he promises.

It still takes several minutes to get Neil to fully release him, but eventually Todd breaks free, laughing openly at Neil's grunt of protest as he stands.

"You're ridiculous, Neil Perry." Todd giggles, shaking his head.

Neil doesn't stop watching him as he gathers his nightclothes, that soft, intent gaze following his every move.

For a moment, Todd considers slipping into the showers to change, but the thought of leaving Neil, even for a minute, feels impossible tonight.

So he stays.

When he glances back, Neil's eyes are still on him, warm and charged.

Todd *knows* he should be more self-conscious, the way he always is in the locker room before soccer, but he isn't.

Not with Neil.

So he starts to change right there, in full view, though his heart thuds relentlessly in his chest.

There's a faint gleam in Neil's eyes as Todd pulls his sweater over his head.

He watches openly. Todd can feel him following every movement.

It makes his skin prickle, not in embarrassment but in something warmer, something that feels a lot like being seen.

And for once, he doesn't want to hide.

"What are *you* staring at?" Todd laughs eventually, trying to sound casual, though his pulse trips.

Neil feigns innocence. "Oh, nothing. Just taking a look at my surroundings."

"Oh, surveying the land, are you?" Todd teases back, and his stomach flips as Neil's gaze travels, slow and unashamed. "Find anything interesting?"

Neil props himself up on one elbow, pretending to consider. "Hmm. Come to mention it…" His eyes settle back on Todd's chest, then slowly flick back to Todd's own eyes. "*Definitely*."

Christ.

If Todd thought Neil's subtle teasing in recent weeks had been enough to undo him, nothing could've prepared him for *this* Neil.

The Neil who looks, who touches, who lets himself want.

Who flirts with him openly.

Todd can feel the heat rise to his cheeks, which only seems to amuse Neil further.

When he finally returns to the bed, Neil reaches for him at once, tugging him close, so close there's no space left between them. Todd goes willingly, a wave of relief and warmth flooding through him as he disappears into Neil's arms.

Neil exhales softly, as though he's been holding his breath all evening. Eyes closed, nose buried in Todd's hair, he seems to breathe him in, slow and deep, as if memorizing him.

Todd strokes his back in small, absent circles, hoping it's comforting, hoping it says what he can't.

"Todd…" Neil whispers, voice rough at the edges.

"Yeah?"

"I… wish it could always be like this."

Todd lifts his head slightly. "Like what?"

Neil's lips twitch in a ghost of a smile. "I wish… I just…" He trails off, breath catching. A quiet huff escapes him as he presses his forehead to Todd's, the words refusing to come.

Todd snuggles in closer, tucking his face into Neil's neck. He hopes Neil understands what he's trying to say, that this is enough, that he *wants this* too, more than he can ever say aloud.

Neil's breath stutters against his hair, and then his arms tighten around him.

"Can we…tomorrow…after the show...can we talk? About…us?" Neil sounds nervous as he says it, and Todd's breath catches.

It's been pretty obvious what their relationship has been building to, but neither of them has ever referred to what they have as being an "*us*."

The word sends a warm thrill through his whole body.

He can't help but press a small, light kiss to the closest patch of skin he can reach, somewhere along Neil's collarbone.

Neil gasps softly at the sensation and pulls him in tighter, as if trying to fuse them together.

"Yeah, Neil. Of course."

He feels Neil's grin against his hair.

God, he wants to pull him down and show him just how badly he wants him.

But it's late, probably way past one by this point.

A school night.

Neil will have rehearsals straight after the final bell tomorrow.

And then… The play.

What Neil has been building towards for months.

What Neil is risking everything to see through.

He needs rest. They *both* do.

But tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, maybe he'll get to be Neil's. And Neil will be his.

For now, he just holds him as close as he can, breathing him in.

The warmth, the faint trace of soap and cold air, the softness of his skin.

I love you, he thinks. *I love you with all my heart, Neil Perry.*

Out loud, he only murmurs, "Get some sleep, Neil. It's a big day tomorrow."

A beat of silence.

Then the press of lips against his hair, gentle, sure, almost like a promise.

It melts Todd's heart.

"Okay." Then, after a beat: "G'night, Todd."

He sounds so hoarse as he says it, sleep clearly pulling him under.

Todd thinks he could listen to that voice every night for the rest of his life.

“Night, Neil.” He tries not to sound too lovesick and definitely fails. But it doesn’t matter.

Neil already seems halfway asleep, humming softly into Todd’s hair, his breath slowing, his hold on him loosening only slightly.

Neil drifts off quickly after that, but Todd stays awake, still holding him, as though his arms alone might be enough to fend off anyone who means Neil harm.

He doesn’t sleep for some time. He knows he’ll regret it tomorrow in Hager’s class at 8AM, but listening to Neil’s breathing, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, feels almost holy.

He feels he needs to bear witness to the miracle of this boy’s life.

To bask in the fact that Neil chose, of all people, *Todd* to hold like this.

Todd to trust in a way he never has before.

As Todd finally drifts off, sinking deeper into Neil’s arms, one final thought hums through him:

I could do this forever. If he asked me, I’d stay as long as he needed me.

Outside, the wind howls, painting every inch of the school in frosted white.

For now, the boys are warm in each other’s arms as the night drifts toward morning.

But time, as she so inevitably does, ticks on.

Today was the day that everything would change.

Chapter End Notes

Getting to Chapter 30 of a fic is something I've never done before, so this is an achievement. What I already have written of the events to come is over 30k words (lmaooooo), so sorry if you get sick of me from now on.

Alsooooo it's my birthday week (happy Scorpio season folks), so apologies if the next chapters take longer to come to you. Just know they are always coming, this fic is my main drive atp <3

Chapter 31: Chapter 31.

Chapter Notes

Hiiiiiiii babydolls!!! I've been really sick the last few days so sorry I haven't been as focused on this.

(Also thanks everyone who sent me birthday wishes, I really appreciated each one)

I really want to do this fic justice and give it the detail it needs so I've needed a bit more time than usual.

Anyway here we are!! The day of the play (eek) we have a lot to get through so quite a few chapters will just be based on this singular day.

This one's a little short and sweet but pretty necessary so I hope it leaves you satisfied until the next few really long chapters <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil.

When he wakes, for a breath he almost forgets.

It's warm.

Almost *too* warm.

A weight across his chest, a face pressed into the hollow of his neck.

Arms wrapped around him like a vice.

Silken hair ticking his nose, soft lips breathing on his sternum.

It's the most secure he's ever felt waking up.

Must be a dream, he thinks, *a wonderful, delicious dream.*

Sunlight slips through the curtains and draws patterns on the blankets.

Even as the light coaxes him awake, he's still being held.

He blinks slowly and everything comes back.

Todd is there, sprawled on top of him, breath soft against his skin, hair mussed, lashes fluttering as he sleeps.

Dawn lights his face in a way that makes him look almost angelic.

Neil has always thought Todd was a pretty sleeper, but up close, he's practically a divine being.

An entity more than human.

A beautiful, beautiful dream, as though conjured from the very enchantment placed upon Lysander.

He takes a few of these blissful moments to take him in.

His soft features, his light eyelashes, still long, featherlike.

He'd find the sight utterly mesmerising, if those lashes weren't hiding the eyes he adores so much.

He could drown in them, those azure whirlpools, lured by the sirens that surely lived beneath their surface.

Neil knows he would go willingly.

Todd's soft, heart-shaped face, his round kissable cheekbones.

His boyish button nose.

His lips.

God, his lips…

Those perfect, lovely lips that had so boldly pressed against Neil's cheek the previous night.

The softness of them, completely unchapped, the way they're slightly downturned, so Todd permanently looks like a sad puppy dog.

The feel of his breath coming from them, against him now, the way they brush his neck slightly.

The way, when he grins, really, *really* grins, the little mole on his cheek becomes more prominent.

The way his chin dimples so adorably.

That little cupid's bow, that makes him look like some cherub or prince or something straight out of Neil's fantasies.

God, he needs to feel those lips against his, to finally show him how he feels.

He longs to *tell* him exactly how he feels.

How much better Welton has been since he came along.

How Neil has never allowed himself to enjoy anything, has always done what was expected of him, but from one glimpse of that perfect face, he'd wanted more.

More out of life, more for his future.

How Todd has awoken the childlike wonder in him that he thought had died years ago.

Certainly since Welton.

He hasn't felt like himself, truly himself, since that first day his father tied his Welton tie, told him to make something of himself, that they were counting on him.

But the moment Todd Anderson stumbled and stammered his way into his heart, he's felt like *Neil* again.

The *real* Neil.

The Neil who can be who he wants to be.

The Neil who chases his own dreams.

The Neil who strives for happiness over success.

He needs to tell him all this.

To tell him and then kiss him all over.

To have their feelings out in the open, and he needs it soon.

He'll go insane otherwise.

And yet, somewhere under the thrill, something cold stirs.

A whisper of guilt he can't quite shake. He pushes it down, just for now.

Neil is almost considering waking Todd to cash in on his desire to kiss him, but then he hears the distinctive sounds of the other boys stirring.

Their laughter, their chatter, the scrape of beds, the shuffle of feet.

He hears Cameron lecturing Charlie about smoking so early in the morning, about how he'll get them both expelled, hears Pitts laughing at something undoubtedly Meeks has said. Hears Knox reading over the poem he wrote for Chris for what must be the zillionth time.

Neil sighs. There's no time.

They need to get up, and soon.

Get showered and changed before breakfast.

They need to start the school day.

And then…

Christ, the *play* is today.

The events of yesterday hit him all at once. And not just the gentle, lovely moments with Todd, but the ugly ones too.

God, the stuff with his father.

The stuff with his mother, come to think of it.

Tension reenters his body.

Later today, he will be explicitly ignoring his father's instructions.

His mother's frantic plea.

Her words about consequences. A warning.

An *omen*.

That part feels worse somehow.

The way she'd looked at him, desperate, pleading, as if she knew something he didn't.

As if she wanted to protect him, but not from Tom's anger.

From Tom himself.

He's sure he didn't imagine the way she insinuated that his father's rage wasn't just about the play.

It was about *him*.

About his softness.

His sensitivity.

His way of being.

He can't change that. So why should he listen?

Mrs. Patty Perry probably just wants to keep the peace, to calm the storm before it starts.

To please Tom.

To make their home livable.

Neil does understand, in a way.

She's the one who lives with that rage day in and day out.

But this is his *life*.

He's spent years being the Neil his father wanted.

The Neil who strove to be a doctor.

The Neil who did everything right.

The Neil who never disappointed, no matter the cost.

And what good has that done him? What good at all?

He's done everything Tom had ever asked, and still it's not enough.

It *never* is.

Never enough, no matter what.

So why should he even *try* anymore?

Here he is, with Todd's heart beating steady against his ribs. Still alive. Still himself.

He exhales, a bitter laugh catching in his throat. So what if he's already failed his father?

Maybe this is what freedom feels like.

Reckless, terrifying, beautiful.

And yet, beneath it all, the thought of Keating flickers suddenly across his mind, that look of fierce, unshakable faith the man always gives him.

Faith that Neil's words alone could sway his fathers decision.

That through optimism alone, Neil would be able to live out his own dream.

He'll have to face his beloved teacher sooner or later.

Keating will ask if he talked to his father.

And what can he possibly say?

The truth would only make things worse.

He can picture it already, Keating's disappointment, that soft insistence that Neil should try again, that *surely his father would listen if he just explained himself*.

But he wouldn't.

Mr. Perry never listens. Never yields. Not even half an inch.

Keating means well, God, he means *so* well, but he'll never understand what it's like to live under someone like Tom Perry.

Neil rubs a hand over his face, feeling the faintest pang of guilt in his chest. He hates the idea of not being honest with Keating, hates how the thought of it already feels like betrayal.

But what other choice does he have?

If Keating knew, he might try to help.

He might even go to his father himself.

And that… that would end everything.

Tom would probably endevor to get Keating fired, and *then* where would they be?

Welton would lose their best teacher and the other Dead Poets would lose their Captain.

That *can't* happen.

Not because he doesn't believe Keating would fight for him, he *knows* he would, but because Keating would lose everything for trying.

So he pushes the thought down. Locks it away.

Just for now.

He'll deal with it later.

Todd stirs, yawning softly, stretching just enough for Neil to tighten his arms around him instinctively. He presses a tender kiss into Todd's hair, breathing him in, because why the fuck wouldn't he now?

Why not risk this?

Why not love Todd loudly?

Well… not *too* loudly. Not where anyone could hear.

Even freedom has its limits, he reminds himself, especially his kind of freedom.

Still, why wouldn't he, when he has nothing left to lose?

His father will probably be done with him for good after tonight, and for the first time, the idea of being disowned doesn't fill him with dread. It feels almost like relief.

He could run. Start over. Stop pretending to be someone he isn't.

And Todd… Todd could come too.

They could be free together. No more hiding, no more holding back.

He could be his… really, truly Todd's.

The thought is dizzying, too bright, too ambitious, but it's the first one

that's made sense in months. In years.

The bell clangs in the corridor, sharp and unwelcome, announcing ten minutes until breakfast.

Goddamn it.

Todd groans and burrows closer, his eyelashes brushing Neil's skin.

Neil's heart lurches. He stares down at him, Todd's nose scrunching at the shrill chime of the Welton bell, a muffled whine following as boys thunder down the corridor outside, one of them bumping their door.

The sound makes Neil laugh softly under his breath.

"Morning, you," he whispers, and even to his own ears he sounds utterly, hopelessly smitten.

Todd blinks fully awake, sleepy confusion melting into that wide, perfect grin as he realises how close they are.

This close, Neil can see the faint freckles dusting his nose bridge, the way his pupils widen the second their eyes meet.

Pink begins to rise on his cheeks, that familiar shy glow that makes him somehow even more adorable.

God, he's so damn gorgeous.

Neil wants to see that sight every morning for the rest of his life.

Maybe, he thinks recklessly, maybe he can.

"Hey…" Todd murmurs, his voice soft, eyes flicking to Neil's mouth as he bites his lip gently.

Jesus.

Neil's not used to Todd letting himself look. Usually it's just quick glances, shy flickers of blue eyes before they dart away again, as if even wanting too much is dangerous.

But now… now Todd's expression is open, unguarded… happy, in a way that's completely, wholly for him.

God, he wants him more than *anything*.

He wishes they could stay like this all morning, lost to the world, finally show each other everything they feel.

Everything they've never been allowed to say.

That they could just exist, side by side, without the world waiting beyond the door.

Meeks's voice drifts through the wall, lecturing Knox about something or other, Pitts's laughter following right after. They don't have long before Hager starts his morning patrol, banging on doors and scolding any stragglers.

Neil swallows. "We should get up," he says, reluctant, the words heavy on his tongue. "It's six-thirty."

Todd groans, muffled against his chest. "Mmmph. *Why*?"

Neil chuckles, unable to help himself. He presses another soft kiss to Todd's temple, and Todd sighs contentedly against him.

"Sorry, sweetheart. I didn't make the rules."

The word slips out, *sweetheart*, in an utterly too transparent tone.

For a moment they both just watch each other smiling.

It feels right.

Natural.

Todd looks startled but shyly pleased.

Neil doesn't miss how much pink floods Todd's cheeks, or the way his eyes dart back to Neil's lips like a magnet.

God… he's so…

A sudden erratic knock on the wall cuts through their little bubble.

Charlie's voice, half-amused, half-exasperated calls out.

"Wake up, knuckleheads! You'll both get demerits if you don't get out here pronto."

The both groan and grudgingly extract themselves from each others hold.

They dress in silence, but Neil notices how neither of them bother to hide the way they watch each other, lingering, bashful, wanting.

When they're both in their Welton uniforms they sigh, stare at one another a long moment, hesitant to leave the blissful confines of their bedroom.

"Tonight?" Neil whispers. His heart thunders so loud he's sure Nolan could probably hear it two floors down.

Todd's whole face softens. His eyes glow with that shy wonder that makes Neil's chest ache, and he gives the smallest, sweetest smile, hopeful, excited, alive.

"Y-yeah… yeah, Neil."

Neil pulls him close, just for a few seconds, breathing him in, the faint scent of soap and paper and sleep, the steady beat of his heart against his own.

He wants to stay like this, suspended in time, before the day can ruin it.

When they part, though still close enough to feel each other's breath, Todd opens his mouth as if to speak but the door flings open.

They jolt apart instinctively.

Charlie strides in, arms crossed, looking every bit like someone who's been knocking for a while. His brows lift, unimpressed but amused.

"C'mon, idiots. Cameron's practically having an aneurysm out here."

A muffled "*I am not!*" echoes faintly from the hallway, and Charlie rolls his eyes.

"We gotta move before Hager decides to make an example out of us."

His gaze flicks between Neil and Todd, lingering just long enough to make Neil's stomach twist.

Then that all too familiar grin spreads across Charlie's face, teasing, knowing.

He looks like he's about to say something entirely too revealing, so Neil groans and swats at his arm.

“Okay, okay, we’re coming.”

Charlie just smirks, eyes twinkling, muttering. “Oh yeah, I’ll *bet* you were.”

He wiggles his eyebrows, and Neil shoves him, *hard* this time. Charlie yelps, but laughter escapes anyway.

Neil can’t help smiling, even as his cheeks burn.

He’s just… so *grateful* for Charlie.

Grateful that, for all his best friend’s asshole-ness, he treats Neil exactly the same as he always has.

That he knows… *really* knows… what Neil is, how he feels about Todd, and doesn’t care one bit.

Treats him like he would if Neil had a hopeless crush on a girl.

It’s almost unbearably moving.

Warmth spreads through Neil’s chest as the thought settles in.

He loves that jackass more than he could ever say.

As the three of them spill into the corridor, catching up with the rest of the Poets, the early morning light floods through the tall windows, catching in the dust that swirls around their shoes.

Todd’s hand brushes his, brief, almost accidental, but enough to send that familiar spark racing through Neil’s chest.

He glances over, catches Todd’s eye, and grins helplessly.

For a moment, it feels like the whole world has narrowed to just the two of them.

Tonight, he thinks, *is going to be the best night of my life.*

He knows it.

Keating.

“Mr. Hopkins,” Keating begins, pacing before the chalkboard, “could you tell me what you think this stanza is telling the reader? Thinking thematically?”

George Hopkins, ever the reluctant participant, sighs as if simply existing in this classroom is an unbearable chore.

“Uh… that death is bad?”

Keating just about refrains from pulling his hair out.

The boy doesn’t even *try*.

The rest of the class snickers, which only seems to embolden George, who leans back smugly, arms folded.

“Ah, I see why your interpretation might lead you there, Mr. Hopkins,” Keating says, forcing a patient smile. “But it’s never quite so simple, is it?”

He turns to the board, chalk in hand, and writes out the stanza in a looping scrawl, before turning back to the class.

There has come to me a notion, amounting to a certainty, that I am dying!

I have gone down and down,

As if resistlessly, hopelessly, inexorably, pressed,

The clouds already closing in upon me,

Oh! it is the feeling of death, my terminus near,

Haply I may not live another day.

“See, death is an inevitability and many of our great American authors use it not to just mourn the end, but to teach us about life. About *love*. About the pursuit of happiness.”

From the second row, Charlie Dalton mutters, “What is this, the Declaration of Independence?”

A ripple of laughter follows.

Keating turns, one brow raised. “Thank you, Mr. Dalton. Glad to hear you’re listening today.”

Charlie grins, holding up his hands in mock surrender. “I always listen, Captain.”

“Well,” Keating says dryly, “you could’ve fooled me.”

The room chuckles, and even Neil, who had seemed distracted until now, smiles faintly.

“The point is, gentlemen,” Keating continues, chalk tapping lightly against the board, “death—though it unsettles us, though it hurts to lose someone—is a neutral part of life. It is unavoidable. No matter how we try to cheat it, rationalize it, or fear what may come after, it is still inevitable.”

He looks out at his class. Some boys wear that glazed, dutiful expression, half-listening, half-dreaming of lunch.

Others, like most of his Dead Poet initiates, are more engaged, leaning forward slightly.

And then there’s Neil.

Neil Perry sits utterly still, eyes fixed on the board, his expression unreadable.

He looks attentive, almost serene, but Keating doesn’t see the tremor in his fingers, the way his thumb keeps tracing the edge of his workbook, over and over, like he’s trying to hold something in.

Keating can’t help but think back to their conversation the night before, Neil’s father, his unrelenting control, his refusal to let his son perform in A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

The boy looks calmer today, even a little lighter.

Maybe, Keating thinks, *he spoke to his father.*

Maybe Tom Perry finally listened.

Though deep down, he doubts it.

John Keating has never met Tom Perry himself, but he’s heard

enough.

McAllister has spoken of the man in hushed tones in the teachers' lounge several times, as though speaking too loudly might summon him.

"He's a tricky one," McAllister had said once, late in the evening over weak tepid coffee.

"*I gave Neil an A-minus on a paper. A great essay, mind you. It just needed a few small revisions. I even wrote glowing comments. But Perry went ballistic. Demanded Neil retake the test, said I was being too soft on him. Even insisted I do private sessions with him."* McAllister had shaken his head, looking baffled as he sipped from his cup.

"*Neil doesn't need private sessions. He's one of the brightest in the class. But that A-minus might as well have been an F to that man."* He'd concluded glumly.

Keating had listened quietly then, fingers tapping the edge of his mug.

A chill had run through him, not just from the story itself, but from what it revealed.

He's seen fathers like Tom Perry before.

And every time, it never ends well.

Even his own father hadn't been a piece of cake.

Reginald Keating had been an army man and had run his household as though it were a barracks.

Keating, the youngest of six boys, had been all but overlooked in comparison to his strapping older brothers, each of whom went on to become "proper" army men themselves.

Suffice to say, Keating's pursuit of teaching had not been welcomed in the eyes of Reginald.

To this day, he still received scathing letters from the old man, lamenting his "soft" career, his "unfitting" choice of bride, his lack of offspring.

Blah, blah, blah.

He had the luxury of ignoring him now, of never having to answer to that voice again.

But Neil doesn't have that luxury. Not yet.

At least for another year, he'd have to weather his father's grip.

Keating only hoped that Neil's friends, and perhaps Keating himself, could help him endure until then.

That he might continue to follow his passions, not his father's.

The bell rings.

Immediately, the classroom erupts into noise, boys shoving books into bags, calling to one another, laughing, hooting as Keating tries futilely to make himself heard over the commotion.

"Gentlemen! Your spoken word assignment is due Tuesday. *Tuesday*, boys, remember!"

No one seems to listen. Not properly, anyway.

Neil, however, doesn't move. He's still at his desk, pencil in hand, writing something small in the margin of his workbook.

Todd leans down to whisper something, and Neil's glum expression softens.

He looks up at his friend like the boy has just hung the moon.

Todd says something else Keating can't hear and pats his shoulder gently before heading out with the others.

The room empties.

Keating watches Neil for a moment longer before approaching, that kind, measured smile returning to his face.

Neil startles slightly, realising he's the last one left, and begins hurriedly gathering his things.

Keating rests a hand on the back of a nearby chair. "Did you talk to your father?" he asks softly.

Neil falters, eyes darting briefly before landing on the floor. "Uh… he didn't like it one bit," he says, his voice uneven, "but at least he's

letting me stay in the play."

Keating feels a rush of genuine delight, it's fantastic news.

So the boy *did* speak up for himself. He did tell his father how he felt.

He actually stood his ground.

So why does he still look so pale, so unsure… so *sad*?

There's something strange about his expression… not defeat exactly, but a kind of reckless calm, as if he's already made peace with whatever comes next.

"He won't be able to make it," Neil adds after a pause. "He's in Chicago."

He stumbles over the words, brow furrowing, still unable to meet Keating's eyes.

"But, uh… I think he's gonna let me stay with acting."

His tone is off. Too flat. He laughs a little, that nervous, rehearsed kind of laugh that doesn't reach the eyes. Keating studies him carefully, every instinct whispering that something isn't right.

"Really? You told him what you told me?" he asks, leaning in slightly, trying to read the boy's expression.

Neil stammers again. "Yeah. He wasn't happy. But he'll be gone at least four days."

He fidgets with his books, shifting them from arm to arm, almost dropping one. "I don't think he'll make the show, but I think he'll let me stay with it. *Keep up the school work*."

He does a mock pointer finger, a stiff imitation of his father's tone, but the gesture falters halfway as Keating's smile fades.

The teacher feels it then, that quiet chill in his chest.

Something about the boy's energy, his eyes, the mechanical way he's speaking.

It doesn't feel right.

If Keating didn't know any better…

Neil murmurs, “Thanks,” and without meeting his gaze again, gathers his things and hurries out the door.

Keating stands there a long moment after he’s gone, hand still resting on the back of the chair.

If he didn’t know better… he’d think the boy was lying to him.

But… why would he?

Keating exhales, wiping the board clean, though his thoughts refuse to follow the motion.

They stay with Neil, the way his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, the way his voice caught halfway through every sentence.

He wants to believe him. God, he wants to believe him.

That Neil found his voice. That he stood his ground. That he fought for what he wanted.

But the more he turns it over, the less it sits right.

The memory of the night before creeps back, Neil’s devastation, the quiet certainty that his father would never understand, that there was no way out.

I’m trapped.

The words echo through Keating’s mind long after he leaves the classroom, lingering like chalk dust in the air.

If Neil has lied… if he’s still doing the play in spite of his father’s wishes… what will the consequences be?

He thinks again of the lines they’d read together, Whitman’s meditation on death and renewal still ghosting the blackboard in faint white traces:

Dull, parrot-like and old, with crack’d voice harping, screeching chirps—
lingering, dying ones—

Goodbye and goodbye with emotional lips repeating.

Enough, O gliding present—enough, O summ’d-up past—

Is there a single final farewell?

He pauses, the last line echoing in his mind.

Behind a goodbye there lurks much of the salutation of another beginning.

He's said it to the boys as encouragement, as a way to remind them that even in endings, there's life to be found.

But now, alone, the line feels heavier.

Like a truth he doesn't yet understand pressing faintly at the edges of his thoughts.

He exhales, sets down the chalk.

The sun has shifted, throwing long shadows across the rows of empty desks.

For the first time, Keating feels the quiet stirrings of something he can't quite name, hope, maybe.

Or dread.

As if somewhere beyond these walls, one of his boys is already standing on the edge of his own beginning.

But with each new beginning comes an ending.

What, Keating wonders to himself, *might that ending look like?*

Chapter End Notes

I have a quick question for anyone who feels as invested reading

this as I do writing it. I have a lot planned for the epilogue which currently stands at 10k words alone.

a) Would you guys prefer at the end of this fic a super long chapter of epilogue and to read it all in one
b) if I expanded it into a full blown sequel and just make the epilogue moments (which includes their senior year and beyond) into full chapters rather than more of a montage ???

Either one I would make as good as possible - just depends how much more of me yapping you'd like.

Chapter 32: Chapter 32.

Chapter Notes

> Hey guysss! I'm sorry this chapter isn't hugely Anderperry focused (the next few will very very much be). But these are pretty big in terms of two characters development for later on/my potential sequel. So I hope you enjoy anyway.
>
> Also first two person pov in a little while! Feels just like the early days of this hehe x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jeffrey.

He must be insane coming back here voluntarily.

As the bell rings to signal the end of the school day, Jeff takes a deep breath and steps inside Welton Academy.

The smell hits him first, chalk dust and floor polish and something faintly metallic, like old pipes. The same smell that clung to his blazer all the years he was here.

It's just the same as he remembers. The same varnished wood, the same polished brass plaques, the same echo of shoes clicking against the hall. They haven't even changed a lick of paint.

He shudders slightly, but straightens up. He has a mission.

A couple of teachers passing by recognise him… and that's not part of the plan. He's stuck exchanging pleasantries for a good five minutes. "Yes, yes, I'm a lawyer now," he repeats, shaking hands and smiling too much, nodding through remarks about *'Welton's golden graduate.'*

By the time he manages to make his excuses and slip away, he's already got that old familiar itch beneath his collar, the one that says *get out while you can.*

It isn't until he's standing at the stairwell to the dorms that it dawns on him: he's never actually known which room Todd's in. He frowns at the rows of numbered doors stretching up the hallway.

Ah, crap.

He can't exactly knock on all of them yelling "Todd Anderson!" without getting some weird looks.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Jeff turns to see a short man with a warm smile and kinder eyes than any Welton teacher Jeff had ever encountered.

Still, he jumps anyway, feeling caught out.

"Uh—yeah, sorry. I'm Jeffrey. Jeffrey Anderson, I'm—"

Recognition flashes through the man's eyes, and Jeff braces himself for the usual spiel: *Oh, the famous Welton alumnus! We have your photo in the lounge! What an exemplary student you must have been!*

Instead, the teacher smiles even wider and nods.

"Ah, Todd Anderson's older brother? I should've guessed. You look alike — same eyes."

Jeff blinks, momentarily thrown. It's not often anyone calls him Todd's brother. Usually it's the other way around

That's Todd, Jeffrey Anderson's little brother.

The afterthought. The quiet one who never quite measured up.

It's nice, for once, to know Todd can be Todd first to someone. To be seen for who he is, not for who he isn't.

"Yeah," Jeff says, smiling softly. "Yeah, I'm his big brother."

The man's handshake is firm but kind.

"John Keating," he says. "I'm Todd's English teacher." And then with an unbelievable fondness in his voice, that's never usually reserved for Todd. "He's a great kid. Stellar at English. Has a way with words you wouldn't believe."

Ah. So this is *him*.

The teacher Todd keeps writing about in those clipped, half-nervous letters home, the teacher who makes him think, who makes him feel.

Jeff can see why.

Keating seems like the sort of teacher who actually listens.

Someone Todd's never really had.

"Are you looking for Todd?" Keating asks then.

"Yeah," Jeff says, and he can't help the grin that creeps across his face. For once, it's a genuine, boyish thing.

"I've got some pretty amazing news, actually. I'm staying with our folks this week, so I figured I'd come tell him in person, but… it occurs to me I haven't the foggiest where his dorm room is."

Keating gives him a look that's far too knowing for someone who's known him less than five minutes, an almost teasing smile Todd must see every day.

"Well, for your future reference," Keating says, "Mr Anderson and Mr Perry's dorm is 16B." He pauses, eyes glinting. "But I'm afraid you won't find him there at this hour."

He gestures for Jeff to follow. "Come on. I think I know where he'll be."

They walk across the courtyard in companionable silence.

The winter air is crisp, carrying faint echoes of laughter from somewhere ahead.

Rounding the corner of the main building, they reach the low wall behind it, where a cluster of boys sit talking and laughing together.

Todd is amongst them.

He's perched on the edge of the wall, legs swinging, grinning wide at something one of the guys has just said.

Neil isn't there… odd, Jeff thinks, since Todd's usually glued to his side.

But it doesn't worry him too much.

Even in his absence Todd looks… happy.

Relaxed in a way Jeff can't remember seeing before.

It hits him all at once, a warm, proud ache in his chest. For once, Todd looks like he belongs.

One of the boys ruffles Todd's hair, and Todd laughs, not the nervous, quiet laugh Jeff remembers, but a full, open one.

He ruffles the boy's hair right back, cheeks flushed from the cold.

It's such a small thing, but Jeff feels something loosen in him.

Maybe this is what Todd needed all along, a group where he doesn't have to try so damn hard to fit in.

Then someone spots Keating.

"Captain!" one of them calls raucously, and the rest follow in chorus, voices echoing off the stone walls.

Jeff snorts before he can help himself. "Captain?" he mutters under his breath, amused.

The sound draws Todd's attention and he finally spots Jeff.

"Jeffrey?"

The boy who'd just ruffled Todd's hair blinks in surprise, looking between the brothers and then grins and sweeps into a dramatic bow, his tone exaggeratedly posh.

"My liege!" he declares in a frankly ridiculous British accent. "We have heard such legends of you! We are lowly, please forgive us, my lord."

Todd shoots him a warning look, but Jeff can't help it — he laughs. He misses this part of Welton. The camaraderie, the pranks, the boys who felt like brothers.

The boy looks delighted by Jeff's laughter and grins wider.

"Uh, guys," Todd says, gesturing between them, "this is Jeff, my brother."

A few of the boys nod politely, all good Welton manners and crisp posture, but the loud one goes for another exaggerated bow.

"Majesty, it is I, Charles Dalton. I have waited so long for the honour of serving—"

“Charlie!” Todd shoves him, laughing despite himself. It’s light and real, a sound Jeff doesn’t hear often enough from his kid brother.

Todd turns back to him then, still smiling but with a flicker of confusion in his eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

He doesn’t sound unhappy to see him exactly, just surprised.

And fair enough.

They never really see each other outside of family visits, and those are always… well.

It’s always the same dynamic.

Todd, the subject of quiet disappointment.

Jeff, the golden boy.

It’s not exactly balanced.

For a moment, Jeff’s throat feels tight.

He shifts his weight, clears his throat, forces a smile.

“Could I talk to you for a sec?” he asks. “In private?”

Todd blinks, the smile faltering just slightly. “Uh… yeah. Sure.”

The two walk toward a quieter corner of the courtyard. When Jeff glances back, Mr Keating has joined the boys, settling easily on the stone wall beside them.

He laughs at something the loud one… Charlie, he thinks his name was, says, head thrown back.

It’s strange, seeing a Welton teacher laugh with his students like that.

Strange, but… nice.

Maybe the place isn’t quite as cold as he remembered.

Maybe it’s changing for the better.

Once they’re out of earshot, Todd turns to him, brow creasing. “Is… is something wrong? Is Nana—?”

Jeff shakes his head quickly. “Everyone’s fine, don’t worry.” He hesitates for a beat, then can’t stop the grin spreading across his face. “I, uh… I actually have some news.”

Todd’s curiosity flickers into a small smile. “Oh?”

“So last night…” Jeff starts, the words tumbling out faster than he intends, “Addie and I…we’re in town for her dad’s birthday tomorrow…we went out to dinner. And afterwards…”

He laughs, breathless, shaking his head at himself. “I asked her to marry me.”

For a heartbeat, Todd just stares, and for a second Jeff is worried he’s read him wrong. That he hates Addie. That he wants nothing to do with the wedding.

But then he beams, wide and bright. “And… she said—?”

“She said yes!” Jeff blurts, laughing as the words land.

Todd lets out a delighted noise and pulls him into a hug. The embrace catches Jeff off guard.

It’s a rarity amongst the Andersons, but he holds on, the familiar scent of Todd’s shampoo and the warmth of his little brother almost undoing him.

“I’m so happy for you,” Todd says as they pull apart, still grinning.

“Thanks,” Jeff says, ducking his head, cheeks flushed. “We’re… we’re really excited. We’ll probably do it in Vermont… Addie loves it here. And the folks are obviously nearby, so—”

Todd tilts his head, already smirking. “You know Dad’s going to insist you get married at the country club.”

They both laugh, loud and real, the kind of laugh that breaks years of tension.

For a fleeting moment, they’re just brothers.

Normal brothers.

Brothers without expectations.

Brothers who aren’t constantly compared.

Not the perfect son and the spare.

Just boys, allowed to be boys.

“I’m giving them a daughter-in-law,” Jeff says between chuckles. “They can let us have what we want for once.”

Todd grins, but his gaze drops for a second, something unreadable flickering in it.

“I, uh… I know they can be a little controlling,” Todd says finally, voice low but steady. “In spite of it all, just… make sure you and Addie get to make it your own.”

Jeff blinks, surprised not just at the maturity in his brother’s tone, but at the quiet conviction behind it.

He’s definitely changed since coming to the Academy.

And Jeff suspects it’s little to do with the discipline of the institution.

“Uh… thanks, Toddy,” he says softly. “I really appreciate that.”

A small silence settles between them. The good kind, for once.

Then Jeff nudges him with his elbow, grinning. “So… there’s more.”

Todd looks up instantly, concern flashing in his eyes. “Addie isn’t… *pregnant*, is she?” he whispers, wide-eyed, looking around for anyone watching them.

Jeff lets out a loud, startled laugh. “No, dummy,” he says through his laughter, shaking his head. “I just…” He takes a breath, suddenly nervous. “I wanted to ask you something.”

Todd waits, cautious but curious.

Jeff’s not sure why it feels like a huge step. A rebellion almost. He knows the family won’t approve of this decision.

But for once he doesn’t care.

For once, Todd is his priority.

Jeff rubs the back of his neck. “I was wondering if you’d, uh… if you’d be my best man.”

It takes a second for the words to land. When they do, Todd just blinks, stunned.

“Jeff…? Are you… sure?” He stammers. “You have so many friends and I… I’m not exactly a great speaker and I—I—”

“You don’t have to say yes,” Jeff cuts in quickly. “I won’t be offended. But… I want it to be you. You’re my first choice.”

Todd’s brow furrows as he searches his brother’s face. Then, slowly, a smile begins to form, hesitant, disbelieving.

“Why?” he asks quietly.

The question hits Jeff harder than he expects. That Todd could even need to ask. That he’s so used to being the one overlooked, compared, dismissed.

“Because you’re important to me, Todd,” Jeff says, voice thickening slightly.

“Because I should’ve shown you that a long time ago.”

He shoots him a little smile. “And because… I want us to have something real. Not just the brothers Mom and Dad decided we should be. The kind that choose each other.”

Todd looks away, blinking fast, clearly fighting the emotion that threatens to spill.

“You really mean that?” he manages at last, his voice thin but steady.

Jeff only nods, because for once, he doesn’t feel like he needs to explain himself.

He wants the gesture to speak for itself. It’s plain and simple. He wants his baby brother to be standing up there with him.

Todd gives a small, genuine smile and pats his shoulder. “Yes,” he says quietly. “I’ll be your best man.”

They hug again, brief but warm, a little awkward, but real. For the first time in years, Jeff feels like they might actually know each other.

“I’m really… I’m so pleased for you,” Todd says as they pull apart, a grin tugging at his lips. “Addie’s so, so great.”

Jeff nods, his chest softening at the thought of her. “Thank you. She’s my one.” His smile turns a little wistful. “I only hope you can be that happy someday, too.”

He pauses, glances around for any prying ears, and leans in conspiratorially. “Speaking of…”

Todd’s cheeks flame instantly, seeming to know what Jeff is getting at.

Jeff grins. “Where’s Neil?”

Todd sputters, “He’s… he’s at final rehearsal. For a play. We’re, um, actually supposed to start getting ready soon.”

He busies himself smoothing down his tie, the blush still bright across his cheeks.

Jeff watches him, amused but proud, wondering when his little brother started looking so… grown up.

Finally finding a voice.

A crowd.

Finding support.

Falling in love.

Jeff feels suddenly very old.

“Sure, I’ll leave you to it.” He pauses and then ruffles Todd’s hair causing his nose to scrunch in playful annoyance.

Jeff turns to leave, but then turns quickly back.

“Oh Todd, I almost forgot to say,” Jeff adds suddenly, snapping his fingers. “We’re having an engagement party just before Christmas. Something low key… well, if I can help it anyway.” His eyes glint with mischief. “You’re welcome to bring someone. I don’t know… some uhhh… dreamy schoolboy or whatever.”

Todd flushes, then laughs, looking down at his shoes. “Okay. I’ll ask him.”

So he isn’t denying anything. It’s small, but it’s something, an opening. A quiet confirmation of Jeff’s suspicion. An indirect way of saying he trusts him, trusts him with the truth, and with the risk that comes

with it.

Hopefully Todd knows he'd love him no matter what.

Jeff pats his shoulder, hoping his smile says as much. Todd still looks flustered, but also unbelievably pleased.

"Alright, get back to your friends," Jeff says lightly. "Go pretty yourself up. You know, just in case."

Todd shoves him for that, and they both burst into laughter. It feels good, easy, healing in a way neither of them expected.

"Okay, well, see ya, Todd!" Jeff calls as they calm down.

"See ya… *fiancé*," Todd teases, and Jeff grins so wide it almost hurts.

He still feels like he's dreaming, he gets to keep his Addie forever.

And now, maybe he and Todd can finally be like real family.

Maybe he can make up for all that lost time.

He waves as he crosses the courtyard, turning once to see Todd rejoin his friends, talking animatedly.

There's light in his face Jeff hasn't seen since they were very small kids.

He supposes their parents were right in one way.

Todd does belong at Welton.

Who'd have known?

Charlie.

"Nuwanda… Christ's sake, how long are you gonna be?" Pitts whines from outside the cubicle. "I left my comb in there."

Charlie ignores him and continues tracing the lightning bolt on his chest, the brush dragging cool red paint over his skin.

The air smells faintly of turpentine and dust, the ghosts of Welton's forgotten creativity.

The paint's from the art department, probably hasn't been touched since the dawn of time.

Nolan would blow a fuse if he knew Charlie had nicked it, but honestly, they should thank him for giving the paints a purpose.

Welton art class is a joke anyway, all still-life and stone busts, like creativity's a disease they're trying to keep contained.

Nothing fun.

Nothing colorful.

Nothing alive.

A sharp, loud knock cuts through his thoughts. Charlie rolls his eyes.

"Jeez, Pittsie, thought you were the patient one of our throng. Turns out you're just as bad as the rest of us—"

"Dang it, Nuwanda, I just need the comb for like three seconds for my hair! We've got, like, fifteen minutes, and everyone's almost ready."

Pitts sounds legitimately nervous now, and Charlie has a heart, in spite of his best efforts, so he huffs in mock annoyance, grabs the comb from the floor, and cracks the door open just enough to toss it out before slamming it shut again.

"Hey!" Pitts exclaims, the sound of the comb skittering across the floor making Charlie snort a little. He has a heart sure, but he's still an asshole at the end of the day.

He dips the brush again, swirling the bristles in the thick red.

"You're welcome!" he calls out to Pitts.

A beat passes, then Pitts's voice again, softer now. "What are you even doing in there, anyway?"

Charlie grins to himself. "I'm getting red, Pittsie boy."

He waits for the inevitable questions.

Getting red?

But what is that?

Why?

You are so unique and spectacular, Nuwanda, how do you do it?

But they don't come.

"Okay, sure," is all Pitts responds with a little chuckle, and then Charlie hears his footsteps fade away down the corridor.

He's not sure why he's surprised.

Not the right audience.

Pitts isn't one to fluff one's ego.

He's also not quick to judge, falls right into acceptance. It's an admirable trait.

But Charlie wanted some sort of reaction.

Charlie sighs, glancing down at his handiwork. The paint gleams wet and bright against his skin, bold, wild, defiant.

He'll just have to wait for the big reveal.

Still, when he catches his reflection in the mirror, the flash of red, the dark eyes, something twists in his chest.

It's meant to make him braver, he tells himself. For Neil.

For tonight.

But the unease he's felt since the previous day lingers.

It pulses beneath his ribs, steady and stubborn, like the beat of a drum he can't silence.

All day, Neil's been… off.

Not vastly different, not enough for anyone else to notice, just a little quieter. More… insular.

He's laughed, he's joked, he's spoken up in class, all the usual Neil things.

But underneath, there's this strange stillness.

Usually, Charlie can read him like a script.

One look in Neil's eyes and he knows everything going on in that head.

But today, Neil's eyes won't meet his.

Not even for a second.

Almost like he doesn't want Charlie to read him.

And that's what unsettles him, because Neil doesn't hide.

Not from him.

Never.

With Todd, though, it's been the opposite. Charlie's seen more softness, more risk, the way Neil looks at him, openly now, with a kind of affection that's too obvious, too unrestrained to miss.

Charlie wants to be happy about it.

He is happy, in a way. Proud, even.

Neil's finally letting himself be who he is, standing up to his father, doing the play anyway, loving Todd without trying to disguise it.

But it's the recklessness that gets him.

The lack of Neil's usual caution.

Charlie runs a thumb along the curve of the painted lightning bolt, the red already drying tight against his skin.

He tells himself it's just nerves.

That's all.

But the feeling in his gut says otherwise.

Neil's steady.

He thinks things through, weighs the odds.

He's always wanted freedom, happiness… but not like this.

Not by throwing everything else aside.

Sure, taking the play was rebellion enough, an act Charlie's proud of, one he'll defend to the grave.

But this… today… something feels different.

Off-balance.

Like Neil's leaning too far over an edge neither of them can see properly.

He wants Neil to be himself, to live his truth, to wear it proudly.

But the world outside these walls… even inside them, is unforgiving. Unrelenting.

Until something changes, even Charlie knows Neil and Todd can't be open about their love.

But God, does he wish they could.

It's out of his control, and Charlie can't stand that.

He's used to talking his way out of trouble, to forcing things into motion, not sitting here helpless.

He wants to tell Neil to slow down, to be careful.

He wants to go out there and tell Todd to keep him grounded.

But the words stay stuck somewhere between his chest and throat

His reflection wavers slightly in the mirror, the red on his chest catching the light like a warning.

No. Stop thinking that way.

Tonight he isn't Charlie. He's Nuwanda.

And Nuwanda doesn't care about risk. About danger.

Nuwanda laughs in the face of both.

He throws himself into the fire and dares the world to burn him back.

He encourages his comrades to do the same.

Neil should be taking chances. The boy's never really had the chance to be himself… not truly. Not outside the little make-believe world he and Charlie built as kids, their sanctuary of brotherhood.

Even then, Neil was always looking over his shoulder, checking for the shadow of his father.

Charlie should be thrilled that he's finally shaking that off.

And he is. He *is* pleased. He just… worries.

Nuwanda scoffs from somewhere deep inside. *Get a grip, man. That's not you.*

Charlie nods, almost as if answering him. He dips the brush one last time and fills in the final curve of the lightning bolt.

He looks into the mirror… and really looks.

Staring back at him is an amalgamation of every version of himself.

Nuwanda.

The rogue, the scoundrel.

The fierce, the unapologetic.

The nonchalant womaniser.

He feels safe behind that mask.

Nuwanda is armour, his shield, his helmet.

Charles Francis Vaughn Dalton.

The son of Clifford Montgomery Quince Dalton and Josafine Alice May Dalton.

Clifford, the Chief Executive of some company he's never bothered to remember.

Josafine, daughter of a high-powered lawyer.

The legacy child, meant to become a lawyer like his grandfather, a

credit to the Dalton name, a family man with a future Welton boy of his own.

Charles is who they wanted.

But Charles has never existed. Not really.

He was always just…

Charlie.

The friend, the brother, the fool.

The boy who loves to play, to laugh, to yell until his voice gives out.

The boy who lives for the noise and warmth of the people he loves.

The boy who would follow Neil anywhere…

To the ends of the earth,

Into battle.

And *has.*

But Charlie also has cracks.

A softness he keeps hidden under all that noise.

He has to be loud.

Because the quiet is unbearable.

Because when it's just him, just Charlie, the silence sees too much.

So he paints himself red.

Builds himself a mask.

Nuwanda: his shield, his fire, his armour.

Better to be the rebel than the boy who's scared.

Charlie breathes in.

And with his exhale,

Nuwanda steps out.

Showtime.

Chapter End Notes

Pretty big chapter coming next so I hope you're excited. I'll try and get it to you sooner than this one took. Thanks again to everyone who's commented and supported continually. I really appreciate each and every one.

Also if anyone got the notification when I accidentally uploaded this mid editing, no you didn’t.

Chapter 33: Chapter 33.

Chapter Notes

> Hey kids... um so remember that ultra important big chapter that I promised.... this isn't it.
>
> This was gonna be three POVs in one, but the main section of this ended up being incredibly long so this entire chapter would've been over 8000 words (lmao)...
>
> Besides the next bit deserves to be a stand alone.
>
> So with that being said, I'm posting this now and will post the next one in literally like... a couple hours. It needs some final edits and I like to build SOME suspense. It will be worth it though, I absolutely promise.
>
> Anywhoo, welcome to the play!!!!
>
> I really hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox.

9 hours earlier.

As he exits Ridgeway, hands still quivering, Knox drags in a long breath of crisp winter air.

It’s a beautiful morning.

Cold, sure.

Bitter, even.

But Knox finds the winter beautiful.

Particularly the snow.

He's always adored the snow, everything about it.

The smell of it, the freshness.

Captivating.

Pure.

Gentle.

Much like his beloved Chris.

He sighs a little, hoping his Carpe Diem was worth it.

He may have pushed her away forever. God knows, she'd shrunk back, hidden her face in her hands. And yet…

There had been *something* in her eyes when he finished the final lines of his poem. He swears it.

Not disgust.

Not fear.

Not even anger.

A glimmer.

A blush sweeping her cheeks, as her classmates jeered and threw pencils at him, as the teacher stormed into the homeroom and swatted at him like he was some kind of vermin.

And when he stumbled out the door, threatened with "police involvement" if he ever set foot in the school again, he'd caught her looking at him.

Not smiling, exactly.

But concerned.

Probably for his *safety*, Knox tells himself.

Probably terrified of what Chet Danburry might do to him when he found out Knox was there. That he'd made another move on his girlfriend.

But who gives a rat's ass what that guy thinks?

Ha… *thinks.* That was the bottom line. Chet didn't think. Hadn't a brain.

Didn't have the mind, the passion, the adoration required to be with a girl as wonderful as Chris.

He doesn't deserve her. Not a single bit.

But Knox knows he does.

He has a mind. He has eloquence and manners and feeling. And he knows… *he knows*… Chris admires that in him.

So sure, what he did was crazy.

Probably certifiably stupid.

But he couldn't *not* do it.

He had to show her exactly how he felt.

To let it be known that he, Knox Overstreet, was willing to face public humiliation just to have the most beautiful girl in the world look at him. Even for a second. Even briefly.

A momentary glance from her could feed him for a lifetime.

He rushes back into Welton now, skidding across the marble like a man fleeing the scene of his own romantic crime.

He's missed homeroom and Debate Club, and there will definitely be consequences.

Welton consequences.

But he can just say he felt nauseous or something… clutch his stomach, look a little pale, maybe cough once for good measure.

He'll sell it. He always does.

He can be charming when he needs to be.

If he gives the nurse a convincing enough puppy-dog face, he'll probably get out of anything too serious.

A stern lecture, maybe detention.

At worst, a few lines to write out.

A pain, sure, but not *painful.*

Not the cane.

He winces thinking of how Charlie had hobbled to his dorm that day. There's not a chance in hell Knox is about to face *that*.

He wipes his palms on his blazer, heart still thudding from the stunt, and keeps moving.

He takes the stairs two at a time, still chewing the piece of toast he nicked from the Ridgeway kitchens, brushing crumbs off his coat as he barrels past his friends in the hall.

He hopes they don't give him too much crap; he's made such a spectacle of himself this morning, going on about his poem, about Chris, about fate and destiny and all that.

But of course, Charlie notices him instantly.

Knox had told him the plan that morning, and even *Charlie* looked sceptical, which is saying something.

"*Are you sure this girl is even worth it, Knoxy? Have you even spoken to her*?" Charlie had asked, arms folded, brow raised.

Knox had waved him off with dramatic flair.

Pssh. What would *he* know?

As though Charlie Dalton has *ever* been a great lover.

He's more of a *kiss-and-tell-but-never-stick-around* kind of guy.

Now, Charlie grabs him by the shoulder, sharp enough to jar Knox out of his half-triumphant haze, and the rest of the guys look up immediately, beginning to gather around him, keen for the story.

"Hey, how'd it go? Did you read it to her?"

Charlie's brow is so deeply furrowed it's almost funny. Knox can practically hear the script running behind his eyes:

Disaster. Rejection. Humiliation.

And, well… sure. That was *mostly* what happened.

He's probably blown it.

Very likely has.

But somehow, it doesn't feel like failure.

It feels like the first step he had to take.

He told her. He showed her.

And that's all he *can* do.

So he's… weirdly satisfied.

He could explain that.

He could tell them how Chris looked when he read his poem, how terrified he felt, how his hands shook.

He could admit he still has no real indication she likes him back.

But that wouldn't satisfy *them*.

The guys want drama… and not just the drama Neil is about to unleash onstage tonight.

What they want is a story. A spectacle.

He's not giving it to them.

The important thing is he was true to himself, honest, earnest, authentic Knox Overstreet.

But, well… it's also far too fun to not toy with them a little.

Without Neil here to neutralise the chaos, the rest of them are primed to lose their minds at the slightest hint of mystery.

Especially Charlie.

He *hates* being out of the loop.

And Knox?

He is absolutely going to be intentionally, obnoxiously vague just to watch him squirm.

He gives the smallest shrug and bites into his stolen toast

"Yeah."

Instantly, the boys erupt, talking over one another exactly the way Knox hoped they would.

A little tornado of noise.

A little power trip.

Charlie, for once, actually shushes the others.

He looks borderline offended that Knox isn't giving him something more dramatic to chew on. It takes everything in Knox not to laugh in his face.

"Well, what'd she say?" Pitts pipes up.

The others cluster closer as Knox heads toward the stairwell, their attention flattering and delicious. They're hanging on every word… how could he *not* milk it?

"Nothing…" He shrugs, tearing off another bite of toast.

"Nothing? Whaddaya mean *nothing*?" Charlie's fully exasperated now, jumping after him.

Knox stops, facing them, letting the suspense hang for just a beat.

God, their *faces*.

This is the best part.

"Nothing," he repeats, one last shrug as he pops the final bit of toast into his mouth. "But I did it."

And that's all he gives them.

He turns and starts confidently down the hall, laughing low in his throat as the guys explode behind him, barreling after him, clambering, yelling like a pack of feral animals.

They'll have to wait.

For now, he revels in their anguished yells as they all pile into Keating's classroom.

Later.

Knox sighs as he watches the others comb and gel their hair with painstaking precision.

He's barely touched his own.

It's not that he doesn't *want* to look good or doesn't *want* to support Neil.

He does.

It's just… it feels pointless to try too hard tonight.

Now that the adrenaline's worn off, the day's events have begun sinking in, trickling down into something far less triumphant and far more nauseating.

He still doesn't regret *doing* it.

He knows he had to… for his own peace of mind, for the truth of it, for the chance that Chris might finally understand him.

He just... he wishes she'd said *anything*.

A word, a look, a gesture clearer than that stunned blush and worried stare.

He wishes he didn't have to sit in this limbo of uncertainty.

His eyes drift to Todd, who's standing in front of the cracked mirror, hyper-fixated on smoothing down one stubborn piece of hair. He's scrubbed up shockingly well.

Knox didn't even know Todd Anderson *owned* a proper suit, let alone one that looked so expensive.

It would seem excessive for a high school play where the audience will mostly be swallowed by the dark, but Knox knows better.

Todd wants to look nice for Neil.

He's a boy in love, after all.

A wave of self-pity rolls through Knox… sharp, bratty, embarrassing.

How dare he complain about *his* romantic struggles when at least he's *allowed* to publicly humiliate himself over the girl he loves?

Todd has to *hide*.

Todd doesn't get the luxury of grand gestures and hallway poems and stupid, reckless declarations.

And yet, Knox thinks, at least their love isn't unrequited.

At least there's no doubt in his mind how desperately in love they both are.

They've been more obvious lately, soft looks, small touches, the kind of tenderness you'd have to be willfully blind to miss.

Knox is proud.

But he's worried too.

He hates knowing they could face real consequences if they ever let themselves be that way in front of anyone outside their tight circle.

Even *in* their circle, he's not sure how Cameron would react.

His gaze drifts to Cameron now, laser-focused on perfecting his hair, tongue poking out in concentration.

Lord knows who *he's* trying to impress.

Maybe some girl in the cast?

Unlikely.

Knox isn't sure Cameron has ever said more than two words to a girl, and if he has, they were probably something akin to "*Quiet, please, this is a library*."

More likely, the grooming isn't about vanity at all. It's survival.

A polished image, another rung on the ladder.

Always vigilant, always angling for prestige.

Knox wishes the kid would loosen up. Just once. Have some actual

fun.

Right on cue, Todd of *all* people reaches out and ruffles Cameron's hair, sending the boy into a flustered protest as he groans and bats Todd's hand away.

Knox can't help smiling.

Todd, teasing someone?

Todd, initiating anything?

Todd, relaxed enough to play about?

Not worried about social repercussions?

It's new.

It's growth.

He's flourished these past few weeks.

Not just hiding in Neil's shadow or letting others speak for him.

But holding his own.

Finding his voice.

Speaking up, quietly but surely, in his thoughtful, deliberate way.

It's good to see.

It's more than good, it feels like watching a flower unraveling in slow motion.

The making of a great man.

And Knox, even drowning in his own romantic uncertainty, can't help feeling proud of him too.

Charlie, ever the resplendent, strides in then, and Knox only half-titters as the guys immediately **explode** with reactions, awe, scandal, laughter, despair, swarming around the bright red lightning bolt blazing across Charlie's bare chest.

Of course they do.

Charlie lives for a grand entrance.

And they live for giving him one.

Knox shakes his head, managing a faint smile. He's seen this kind of theatre more times than he can count, Charlie Dalton thinking outside the box, demanding outrage, declaring war on boredom itself.

It's practically tradition by now.

He should join in, throw himself into the raucous chorus of mock outrage and admiration.

Normally... he would.

But today… he just can't muster the energy.

The room feels loud in a way he can't quite absorb, like he's half a second behind everyone else. His chest still feels tight with the weight of what he's done, what he *hasn't* done, what he might've ruined or saved or both.

He supposes he's allowed to be broody, for once.

Charlie would tease him mercilessly for that if he noticed.

No matter.

He'll shake it off once they get to Henley Hall.

Neil needs to see him full-volume tonight… screaming for him until his lungs give out, applauding so hard his hands sting.

That's what matters.

That's the part he can control.

He forces a small breath, lets the noise of his friends wash over him.

Tonight, whatever else is happening in Knox Overstreet's world…

Neil Perry will have his fiercest supporters.

He will guarantee it.

Still, as the boys make their way down the hallway to meet up with Keating, Knox can't shake the image of Chris.

Her beautiful face.

Her smooth skin.

Her gentle nature.

Her soft, sweet lips and what it must be like to—

He slams straight into Pitts.

Pitts, Cameron, and Meeks have all gone completely still, staring past him at someone standing in the doorway.

Knox follows their gaze—

–and blinks.

For a moment, his brain refuses to believe what he's seeing.

If Charlie didn't whistle under his breath, low and stunned, Knox might've thought he was hallucinating her out of wishful thinking.

"*Chris?*" he breathes.

She's right there.

Inside Welton.

In *their* hallway.

He steps toward her automatically, heart pounding, unable to read her expression. Apprehension, definitely.

Fear, maybe. But there's something else too—

Her eyes are locked on him, wide and searching.

She bites her lip.

She takes a small step forward, instinctively closing the distance between them.

And Knox realises—

she came here.

For him.

Everything else, the noise, the boys, the day, all falls away.

The world narrows only to her.

Todd.

Todd whines under his breath when he realises the rest of the group still aren't outside with him. Keating stands beside his car, giving him a mildly puzzled look. Todd turns back toward the building, ready to herd the slowpokes out—

Only to find them all standing frozen, bug-eyed, looking like absolute idiots.

He marches toward them, ready to scold—

And then he sees *her*.

A pretty blonde girl stands just inside the hallway. She's staring straight at Knox, shoulders drawn in, hands trembling ever so slightly as the boys gape at her like fools.

It *has* to be Chris. Chris Noel.

Knox's Chris.

The girl he's written poems for, sighed over, driven them half mad about.

Todd's breath catches. For a moment, everything softens around the edges.

So this is what it looks like, Todd thinks.

Real, impossible, inconvenient, ridiculous love.

Love that pulls you across hallways and schools and reputations.

Love that makes you brave even when you shouldn't be.

He understands Knox better now… the aching, reckless certainty of it.

It's the same current that's been running through Todd for months.

Only Knox gets to feel it out loud.

Knox steps forward, tunnel-visioned, as if the rest of the world has fallen away.

“What are you doing here?” he asks her softly, reaching out as if to touch her and stopping himself at the last second.

Chris looks up at him with wide, earnest eyes. She doesn’t step back.

She doesn’t look disgusted. She just looks… *worried.*

Too worried for a girl who supposedly barely knew he existed.

Todd’s chest tightens.

Knox gets to do this, Todd realises.

Stand in broad daylight, wanting someone.

Let it show.

And no one will expel him, or punish him, or call him names behind closed doors.

No one will tear his life apart because of it.

Knox has obstacles… sure.

But Todd would take Knox’s obstacles over his own, any day.

Keating’s voice booms from outside, snapping the spell.

“Gentlemen, let’s go!”

Todd jumps. They *cannot* be late. Neil needs them there. All of them.

But Knox doesn’t move.

He stands rooted in place, drawn toward Chris as though she’s gravity itself.

And she leans ever so slightly toward him, like she doesn’t want him to go.

“Go ahead, guys,” Knox says quietly. “I’ll… I’ll catch up.”

Charlie snaps out of it first, shaking his head and waving the others

toward the exit.

“Yeah, come on,” Charlie mutters, already striding forward.

Todd turns once more.

Knox and Chris are still standing there, suspended in a bubble of something tender and terrifying and hopeful.

Todd feels a twisting warmth in his chest… happiness for Knox mixed with a quiet ache.

Knox gets to follow his heart.

Todd has to conceal his.

And lately… it’s getting harder.

Since last night. Since this morning.

Since *tonight*.

The night they’re finally going to talk about it.

Finally going to stop dancing around it and actually say it… or *show* it.

The thought makes his stomach lurch, a dizzying mixture of excitement and dread. His chest tightens, too full of everything at once.

He can’t help loving Neil. He never stood a chance.

Todd doesn’t understand how everyone else manages *not* to fall at Neil Perry’s feet. Not when Neil’s heart is that big, that bright, kindness spilling out of him, joy overflowing at the seams.

Loving Neil feels inevitable. That part Todd can accept.

But why Neil looks back at *him* with that same intensity… that’s the part he still can’t wrap his head around.

Except… he knows the signs.

He remembers the way Neil’s eyes soften around him, going glassy and warm, fixed like Todd is the only thing in focus.

That shy little smile, the ducked head, that belongs only to him.

The kisses to his hair, the fingers threaded through his, those safe, steady arms he sinks into without thinking.

Todd knows.

He knows now in a way he can't deny or talk himself out of.

Neil *loves* him.

Maybe even as fiercely as Todd loves him back.

Last night made that clear. Undeniable.

Neil *needed* him.

Neil *wanted* him.

The "why" can wait. That's for later.

For their cocoon.

For their dorm room tonight.

Lights off.

No one else.

Just them.

The thought sends a shiver down his spine, part exhilaration, part fear, woven so tightly he can't tell them apart.

Being loved by Neil feels like being chosen by sunlight. And being this close to finally having him, really having him, feels like standing too close a flame.

Todd would burn gladly if it meant staying in Neil's orbit.

He's jolted from the thought by Cameron loudly complaining about how *cold* the snow is, earning groans from the rest. Charlie, being Charlie, promptly dumps a handful of snow down his collar, sending Cameron shrieking.

They pile into Keating's car, the man insisting Todd ride shotgun.

"I need my own Whitman to hand," Keating jokes, tapping his stack of

programs.

Behind them, chaos reigns exactly as expected.

Cameron is mashed between Charlie, who claimed the window seat first, and Pitts and Meeks, who loudly insisted, “We can share! No need for the trunk!”

They absolutely cannot share, Todd thinks, watching the four of them squish into the narrow backseat like overstuffed luggage.

Pitts’ head is practically touching the ceiling, knees jammed up to his ears.

Cameron is sitting board-stiff, doing his absolute best not to lean on Charlie.

And Charlie, of course, is gazing smugly out the window, legs spread wide, very intentionally taking up more space than any human boy reasonably needs.

It should be funny.

It *is* funny.

The kind of chaos Charlie thrives in.

Todd glances into the rearview mirror just as Pitts looks up and meets his eyes.

Pitts smiles, small, shy, almost secretive.

Meeks’ head goes to rest on his shoulder, like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

And Pitts… blushes. Vividly. Ears pink. Then red.

Todd freezes.

Oh.

…*Oh.*

It suddenly hits him.

He doesn’t know how he’s never noticed it.

He tries not to stare. Not to intrude. But the closeness, the softness, is unmistakable.

Familiar in a way that hits him right in the chest.

The way Pitts subtly angles himself toward Meeks, protective without calling attention to it… Todd knows that feeling. He knows exactly what it means to want to shield someone, to lean without letting the world notice.

Maybe… maybe he and Neil aren't the only ones who feel things they're not supposed to.

Something in Todd loosens. A breath he didn't realise he'd been holding.

He gives Pitts a small, careful smile, supportive, steady, intentional.

A quiet way of saying *I see you. And it's okay.*

Pitts' eyes widen only a fraction, but the understanding is immediate.

He nods, almost imperceptibly, gratitude written plainly across his face. Then, emboldened, he lets himself lean a little closer.

Meeks shifts instinctively, nestling in like this is where he's meant to be.

Todd turns back to the window, heart thudding, but softer now. Warmer.

Overwhelmed by the strange, bittersweet comfort of it all.

The world feels a fraction less lonely.

A fraction less dangerous.

Maybe loving someone… really loving them… isn't as impossible as he's always feared.

Maybe it isn't selfish.

Maybe it isn't foolish.

Maybe it's… survivable.

And that tiny thought, that maybe he isn't an anomaly, that maybe

love can exist even here, even quietly, sparks something unfamiliar but thrilling low in his chest.

Courage.

He thinks of Neil.

Of course he does.

There's hardly been a moment since August where he's thought of *anything else*.

Tonight is Neil's moment.

His ultimate Carpe Diem.

The thing he's waited for his entire life.

And Todd hopes…desperately, foolishly, helplessly…that they can pull this off.

That Mr Perry won't come storming in.

That the world will give Neil just this one thing.

Just this one night.

He will see this through.

If he has to physically shield Neil from his father, he will.

Todd shifts in his seat and meets Charlie's eyes.

Charlie is already watching him, wide grin, red paint bright and defiant across his chest, the picture of reckless bravery.

Nuwanda incarnate.

Todd gives him a small, shy smile, the opposite of the energy Charlie's been channelling all day.

But Charlie softens in return, just for a moment.

And Todd knows, without either of them saying a word, that they share the same vow.

They will protect Neil.

Whatever comes.

Between the two of them, they'll be his guards.

His loyal soldiers.

His shields.

But Mr Perry…

Mr Perry is unrelenting. Immoveable.

A wall Todd has never seen Neil climb without bleeding for it.

Surely, Todd tells himself, surely his parents wouldn't—

They wouldn't physically hurt him.

They wouldn't cast him *out* over a play. Or worse…

…Would they?

He doesn't know.

And the not knowing curls cold and sickly beneath his ribs.

Todd forces a breath.

Shakes himself lightly, as though that could dislodge the fear.

He can't spiral.

Not now.

Neil needs him steady. Present.

Focused.

The boys spill out of Keating's car in a flurry of nerves and wool coats, their breath fogging in the winter air.

Henley Hall looms above them, warm light spilling from the lobby, murmurs of excited conversation drifting out whenever the doors swing open.

Todd keeps close to the others, hands shoved deep in his pockets, trying to steady his breathing.

It's only a play.

Only a performance.

But to Todd, it feels like waiting for a star to be born.

They shuffle down the aisle, Keating guiding them with a steady hand at Todd's shoulder, as though he can sense the tremor running through him.

The theatre is alive, buzzing parents, chattering students, the soft rustle of programs fluttering like wings about to take flight.

Todd's stomach swoops, tightening, loosening, tightening again. His palms are damp. His pulse feels too loud, too close to the surface.

Keating leans down and murmurs, just loud enough for him to hear:

"Breathe, Mr Anderson."

Todd startles.

He must look worse than he thought.

But Keating only gives him a gentle, knowing smile, the kind that says *you are exactly where you're meant to be*, before straightening and pretending to read his program again.

The boys collapse into their seats in a clumsy tangle of elbows and knees.

Someone whispers "*sorry*" in the wrong direction, Charlie mutters something about needing a taller row, Cameron shushes no one in particular.

Todd barely hears any of it.

His heartbeat is in his ears.

The house lights dim.

Todd's breath stops.

The curtains rise.

A hush sweeps the theatre, soft but total, like a held note.

Scene after scene passes, Todd hardly registers the details, only the mounting anticipation, the way his chest inches tighter, fuller, as though something inside him is winding up.

And then—

Neil steps onto the stage.

Everything in Todd goes still.

The theatre, the crowd, the mutter of whispers, even the glow of the footlights… all of it falls away.

The world narrows to one point:

Neil Perry, illuminated in gold.

Todd's breath catches, sharp and painful.

He doesn't blink. He can't.

He can't miss a second of this.

For once, he doesn't even try to hide it, the awe, the adoration, the helpless shining love carved openly across his face as he watches Neil move with a grace and certainty he's never seen before.

Alive.

Radiant.

Real.

Utterly himself.

Perfect.

Todd feels his throat tighten.

This… this is where Neil belongs.

This is who he is when no one is holding him down.

This is the boy Todd fell so hopelessly in love with.

The pride swells in him so fierce it almost hurts.

He has never loved Neil more than in this breath, in this moment,

under this light.

And Todd resigns himself, firmly, fiercely, to show him exactly that.

Consequences be damned.

Chapter End Notes

See ya very soon (promise) <3

Chapter 34: Chapter 34.

Chapter Notes

As promised here she is!

(Anyone who's not seen the last chapter this is the second half of that published just hours after so make sure you don't miss the last one)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil.

"Five minutes till curtain," Nancy calls out.

The woman has been rushing, running, flat-out bolting for the last hour, more athletic than a woman her age perhaps should be.

The backstage is buzzing, cast members bouncing off one another with nervous excitement.

Ginny steps out nervously, tugging at the edge of her costume, looking a little out of place beneath all the lights and chaos.

The events of the early afternoon were nothing short of chaotic.

Lizzy Marks had come down with some terrible flu, much to Nancy's *utter* panic, and as though the theatre gods wanted to finish her off entirely, the Hermia understudy also announced she was sick.

The whole place had felt cursed. *Utterly cursed.*

Neil was pretty sure Nancy had been on the brink of an aneurysm.

But then Ginny, quiet, mild, almost invisible Ginny, had raised her hand.

"Miss… I mean, I went for Hermia and didn't get it… and… I know I'm not as good as Lizzy, but I… I did learn all the lines, and—"

Nancy had practically tackled her in a hug, declaring her the saviour of the entire production.

Now, as she stands before him, cheeks pink and a little self-conscious, Neil gives her the biggest grin he can muster.

“You look great, Gin!”

She laughs, spinning in a shy little twirl.

The gesture is small but brimming with newfound confidence.

“Beautiful!” Neil says, breaking into a tiny round of applause.

Ginny snorts into her hand, and they both collapse into quiet giggles, which earns them a sharp “Shh!” from Nancy.

Ginny leans in conspiratorially, whispering, “Careful, Neil. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were flirting with me.”

She tosses him a knowing wink.

Neil swats at her, grinning.

“Don’t mess up the costuming!” Nancy snaps, and they both throw their hands up in surrender.

“You ready for this?” Ginny asks, her voice trembling.

Neil nods, taking a small gulp of air.

He is.

He *is* ready.

He’s poured so much into this. Everything.

Everything.

More than anyone probably knows.

And it’s been heaven.

It’s been the most joyous time of his entire life.

It’s felt like taking a breath for the first time, like the reins have finally loosened, the chains broken clean in two.

This is what the Captain’s teaching has all led to.

He will no longer walk the path drawn out for him.

He will no longer carry the weight of his family's expectations.

He isn't Neil, the future doctor.

The family provider.

The dutiful son.

He is Neil.

The boy, growing into a man.

The friend.

The student.

The actor.

The lover.

His heart pounds at the last one.

Lover.

He's in love. He loves Todd with every ounce of his being.

This rebellion… this Carpe Diem… it feels like a declaration not only of Neil the actor, the artist, the performer… but also the introduction of Neil.

The real Neil.

The unashamed.

The loud, the proud.

The free.

"Two minutes, folks!" Nancy calls.

Ginny physically trembles… and no wonder, she's in the first scene.

Neil gives her hand a reassuring squeeze before moving to the wings.

She glances back at him, and his thumbs-up relaxes her just a fraction.

He chases a tiny gap in the curtains and peers out.

It takes a moment for him to spot them, but there they are.

Keating, rooting through the programme, making notes in the margins. Never off duty, it seems.

Neil feels a swell of affection for the man. He wouldn't be here without him.

He wouldn't have even set foot in the audition room. He hopes he'll make him proud tonight, hopes he'll show him what his teaching means, what it brings to his students, how he's changed their lives.

Meeks and Pitts are talking animatedly…

Well… Meeks talks, Pitts nods, watching him with laughter in his eyes. No doubt unable to get a word in. They look happy.

Really happy.

Cameron is ranting to Charlie about something, gesturing at the man in front of them who is clearly blocking part of his view.

Charlie nods along, not really listening, his eyes fixed on the curtain. He looks determined.

His best friend has brushed up nicely, looking ridiculously sharp.

He's wearing the suit his father bought him for that mock court trial he'd been forced into.

When Charlie had told Neil the price, he'd nearly collapsed; the amount was almost as much as his own parents' car had cost.

He can't wait for Charlie to see him on stage.

To finally show him what it looks like when he acts on his own wants. His own needs.

He knows Charlie will cheer the loudest of them all.

He always does.

Then Neil double takes. There's only 5 of them. Knox is nowhere to be seen, and Neil's brow furrows.

Odd.

He hopes he's alright.

He had seemed distracted all day, no doubt torn up about Chris.

Neil hopes he's just running late.

That he'll be there.

Knox would adore this show. The guy adores anything whimsical. And selfishly… Neil needs him there for him.

He looks again. Searching. Needing to anchor himself in something familiar.

His eyes drift then, to Todd.

And *God*… the air nearly leaves his lungs.

Todd sits close to Keating, biting his lip, fiddling nervously with his cufflinks. He looks like he's the one about to go on stage.

And the sight of him… he's so beautiful.

Memories flash through Neil's mind in a rush: Todd's head tucked into the crook of his neck; that gentle kiss to his collarbone; the way they'd danced together on the docks last night; the shy, tender press of lips to Neil's cheek.

God.

He wishes he could dart out there now, take Todd's face in his hands, kiss him until the nerves melt away.

Smooth his hair back. Tell him how grateful he is to have known him.

To be loved by him, even in their smallest, quietest moments.

The tiny affections they've stolen, the ones they've carried in secret.

Tonight, Todd will never have to doubt again.

Neil will make sure of it.

Seeing all of them there… almost all of them… emboldens him. Something ignites in his chest, bright and fierce.

He can do this.

He *will* do this.

He can finally be who he wants to be, because they're here.

His family.

His *real* family.

His brothers.

His love.

And they accept him.

Every flaw, every imperfection, every fault, they still accept him.

This is who he wants to make proud.

This is who he wants to impress.

Not the Perrys.

Not Welton.

Not Harvard.

Not the world that has tried to confine him.

Them.

The ones who saw him and stayed.

The lights dim, and Neil takes a deep, steadying breath.

It's time.

By the time Act 2 comes around, Neil feels his nerves reach their peak.

He risks one last glance toward Todd, who knows exactly when Neil's entrance is coming.

He's run lines with him enough times to anticipate the moment by heart.

Todd's own nerves seem to have settled a little.

He looks alert, eager, leaning forward just slightly as though he can catch the sound of Neil's footsteps in the wings.

The sight pulls an involuntary smile from Neil, soft, warm, disbelieving.

He still can't quite fathom it.

That the feelings roaring inside him are mutual.

That the boy scanning the stage, eyes darting toward every shadow, is looking for *him*.

He can't dwell on it. Not now.

Not when he needs to slip into Puck's skin, to breathe mischief, to dance light and wild across the stage and show everyone who Neil Perry truly is.

A performer.

The stagehand touches his elbow, a guiding gesture, and Neil moves toward the hollowed oak trunk, his entrance point.

His heart thuds, but he steps inside the cramped space, pulling the prop shut around him.

He inhales deeply as the stagehand rolls the tree into position.

From outside, he hears Quince deliver his final lines, letting the cadence linger in that exact rhythm Nancy drilled into them during rehearsal.

Then footsteps… Quince and Bottom exiting.

Then the faint, shimmering rise of music.

Puck's theme.

Five seconds.

Four.

Three.

Two—

He springs upward from the oak, and Puck bursts through him like a flame taking to dry tinder.

From the corner of his eye, he hears Charlie's muffled yelp, sees him half-rising out of his seat before Cameron yanks him back down by the sleeve, hissing furiously.

Charlie's enthusiasm is practically levitating him out of his chair.

If Neil were Neil right now, he'd laugh.

He'd lock eyes with his oldest friend and throw him a wink, a little spark for Charlie alone.

But Puck is *not* Neil.

And Puck's eyes belong only to his scene partner, Ginny's understudy, trembling but steady, ready to leap into the moment with him.

"Either I mistake your shape and making quite,
Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite
Call'd Robin Goodfellow."

She delivers the lines cleanly, confident, grounded.

She's good. *Really* good.

Neil feels a flicker of relief for Nancy, who must finally be unclenching her death-grip on the script backstage.

They're going to be okay.

Neil… no, Puck… draws in a breath.

"Thou speak'st aright."

And just like that, the shift happens.

The fear dissolves.

The world narrows to the stage lights and the heat of the moment.

He's *home.*

Even in that razor-sharp focus, his eye catches movement in the back

rows, Knox, finally seated, bright as a lantern in the dark, practically vibrating with pride.

And beside him…

Chris Noel.

Neil's heart gives a brief spark of excitement.

Knox made it. He didn't miss this.

But Puck doesn't linger. He can't. He's alive, speaking, moving—

"I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon and make him smile
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile—"

He clicks into the horse sound and the audience cracks, laughter rolling across the theatre like a wave.

A rush shoots through him. This is different from rehearsals. Bigger. Realer.

It's *electric.*

"Neighing in likeness of a filly foal:
And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl,
In very likeness of a roasted crab…"

He bobs against his scene partner's "cup," and the laughter comes again, louder this time.

The adrenaline is intoxicating.

"And when she drinks, against her lips I bob
And on her wither'd dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale—"

The words come like breath, like instinct.

The lines fall out of him like breath. Like instinct.

He isn't Neil Perry anymore. He's mischief.

He's freedom. He's joy set loose on a stage too small to hold him.

And the audience is right there with him, hanging on every word.

And even without looking, he *feels* Todd out there, the way he watches, wide-eyed, drinking in every second.

It pulses through Neil like its own kind of applause.

He can't think about what comes after the show.

He can't think about consequences.

Not now. Not when this feels like flying.

The scene swells, laughter dropping into perfect, shimmering silence, and Neil rides it all the way to the end, every line sharp, every movement certain, every breath charged with something reckless and bright.

The moment he slips offstage, the applause erupts… loud, thunderous, overwhelming.

He's shaking.

He's alive.

He's burning.

It's the best he's ever felt.

Probably the best he ever will feel.

There's no way he can't do this for the rest of his life.

There's no way he could ever live without this.

The curtain closes on the first half to a burst of applause, the sound echoing even backstage.

"Neil, you were unbelievable!!!" Ginny squeaks, tugging him into a hug that nearly knocks his wreath of flowers askew.

Neil laughs breathlessly, still riding the high.

"You too, Gin! Who'd have thought? You a leading lady! You're gonna be even better in the second half."

She swats at him. “Oh, come off it! We all know we’re mere mortals compared to our wonderful Puck.”

“Please,” Neil grins, cheeks flushed and eyes bright. “Everyone’s been incredible. That scene with you and Thesus? You had them eating out of your hand.”

Nancy claps loudly to get their attention. “All right, folks, that was an incredible first half! I am so proud of you all.”

The cast breaks into applause and laughter, giddy from adrenaline.

Someone yells, “And we’re proud of you, Nancy!” and she gives a little mock-bow before continuing.

“We’ve got fifteen minutes to take a little break, then right back into positions. Let’s make the second half even better, okay, people?”

A chorus of “Yes, ma’am!” and laughter follows.

Before the others can flood the nearby washrooms, Neil slips out, weaving through the labyrinth of backstage corridors.

The backstage noise fades behind him, thinning into an echo the farther he walks.

He’s discovered weeks ago that Henley Hall has a set of old bathrooms no one seems to use, tucked away down a quiet hallway that smells faintly of varnish and dust. Probably a remnant of an old teachers’ lounge.

Regardless it comes in handy.

The tile under his boots is cold, and the hum of the pipes is the only sound. He turns on the tap, splashing cool water over his face.

His heart’s still pounding from the stage.

His adrenaline is through the roof.

He feels like he can conquer anything.

Succeed at anything.

He means to go back right away. To run through the final monologue one last time before the second half begins.

But he hears a shuffle. Then, a soft click. A stall door unlocks.

Neil turns… and nearly forgets how to breathe.

Todd steps out, brushing dust from his pressed trousers.

For a second Neil is convinced he's hallucinated him, conjured him out of sheer want.

Sure, he's seen Todd out of uniform before, but never like this.

His hair is brushed back, that stubborn curl still falling near his ear.

The suit fits him in a way that seems unfair, charcoal grey, maroon tie, cheeks flushed like he's been rushing.

The harsh fluorescent light overhead should make Todd look washed-out, but somehow it makes him *glow*.

Todd spots him there and he's met with a grin so bright it cracks something open in Neil's chest.

His eyes, full of pride, soft and impossibly open, lock onto Neil's face without hesitation.

"Neil!" Todd beams, stepping forward and pulling him into a hug, completely unashamed, gripping onto him like he's never wanted anything more.

Neil nearly buckles.

Todd smells like soap and clean linen and something warm underneath, something that makes Neil dizzy.

A dangerous kind of dizzy.

"Todd," Neil stammers, grinning helplessly, "how did you…how did you even find these bathrooms?"

Todd laughs, scratching the back of his neck.

"Well, Keating's been here before… says he taught Summerstock one year, and, uh, he knows I hate crowds, so he mentioned this place."

Todd shifts, still close like he doesn't quite want to step away.

He glances up again, blue eyes alight.

“You… gosh, Neil, you were magnificent. Better than I’ve ever seen you. I can’t wait to see the rest. You’re a revelation.”

The sincerity in his voice… it hits like a spotlight.

Too bright.

Too much. Neil feels his pulse stutter, sharp and exhilarating.

He stares at Todd for a beat too long, chest swelling to the point of pain.

Something inside him tips, forward, toward danger, toward desire, toward something he’s been holding back for too long.

“Seeing you out there helped. Knowing you were out there… watching me. There for me. It helped so much.”

Todd’s smile falters, not from doubt for Neil’s sincerity, no.

Neil knows there’s no way anyone could think Neil’s actions were out of anything but pure adoration.

Not even Todd.

But Todd’s self doubt, his self perception makes it hard for him to believe anyone could feel so strongly for him.

Neil hopes he can change that once and for all.

He steps closer without thinking, drawn in like gravity’s been rewritten.

“Seeing you… I stopped panicking. Everything clicked. It felt like… like the world narrowed to one point, and it was you, Todd.”

Todd swallows, gaze flicking between Neil’s eyes and his mouth.

Hope flares there, clumsy and terrified and enormous.

He opens his mouth as if to speak, but nothing comes.

He doesn’t need to. Neil suspects he’s thinking the same thing. Full of want. Full of nerves.

Neil’s hand lifts almost involuntarily, fingers brushing Todd’s jaw until he’s cupping his face.

His thumb traces the soft curve beneath Todd's eye.

Todd's breath catches, a tiny, helpless sound, and the echo of it does something dangerous to Neil.

He leans closer, close enough to feel Todd's inhale against his lips.

Todd tries, "Neil, what are you—"

But Neil speaks first, low and soft, like he's afraid anything louder would shatter him.

"I wanted to… wanted to wait until later to do this… I wanted to be able to take my time with you but…"

He strokes Todd's hairline, fingertips grazing the curl that undoes him every time.

He feels reckless.

Burning.

Like he's been fighting himself for months and tonight the fight is finally over.

"I can't wait."

He breathes it like a confession.

"I can't wait till later. I need to do this… here and now."

His heart is hammering so loudly he's sure Todd must hear it, must feel it against his chest because their bodies are brushing now, barely but definitely.

Todd's pupils widen, dark and unguarded.

The world seems to shrink to this tiny, stolen space, cracked tile, humming lights,

Todd's breath trembling against his own.

"Neil…" Todd breathes, his hands lifting to ghost over Neil's shoulders, like he's afraid to hold him too tightly and terrified of letting him go.

His eyes are huge, pleading without meaning to.

Relief crashes through Neil because Todd wants this.

Todd *wants* him.

“I need some courage,” Neil whispers, the words almost shaking. “Something to get me through this last stretch.”

He knows it’s reckless.

He knows someone could walk in.

He knows the consequences… their parents, the school, the world… all of it.

He doesn’t care.

Not tonight.

Not anymore.

“Oh?” Todd manages, voice trembling.

Neil tilts Todd’s chin gently, stepping into his space until the rest of the world ceases to matter.

“Just… some luck,” he murmurs, lips almost brushing Todd’s with every syllable. “From my good-luck charm.”

Todd inhales sharply. Neil’s eyes drop to his lips, pink, soft, impossibly close. He can almost taste the warmth of them.

“I… I’m your good-luck charm?” Todd whispers, eyes flicking down to Neil’s mouth again.

That flicker, that tiny movement, destroys Neil’s last bit of restraint.

He has to make Todd understand.

Has to make him feel wanted, chosen, loved.

Tonight’s the first night Neil hasn’t been afraid to want something for himself.

“Yeah,” Neil breathes, voice cracking with how badly he means it. “You’re gonna give me strength. As you always do.”

Todd’s lips twitch into the smallest, shyest smile, the kind that hits

Neil like a punch, knocks the wind right out of him.

He thinks he'll remember that smile forever.

In his final moments, when his time has run out and he takes his last breath, it won't be the stage he thinks of, or his father, or Welton.

It'll be *this*… Todd's face, Todd's eyes, Todd's smile.

Burned into him. Etched so deeply he knows he'll carry it into whatever comes next.

He'll never be able to part with Todd.

Not his beauty, not his gentleness, not the way he softens under Neil's gaze.

Even if the world tears them apart.

Even if Todd someday decides he wants nothing to do with him.

Even if everything collapses around them.

Neil knows the truth now, terrifying and absolute:

He can *never* lose him.

Not anymore.

He slides his fingers up the back of Todd's neck, feeling goosebumps rise there.

Todd leans into his touch like it's instinct, like he's been waiting for it all his life.

"And… how would I do tha—"

But Neil's lips are already on his

He kisses Todd with every ounce of feeling that's been burning inside his chest for months.

Todd's lips are just as soft as they look, just as warm, and Neil cradles his face like something precious, something fragile, breakable.

For once, he stops fighting himself, stops holding back, stops thinking.

He finally lets go.

For a heartbeat, Todd goes utterly still.

Panic jolts through Neil.

He's ruined it, gone too far, broken something he can never fix.

But then Todd moves.

Softly at first, tentative, trembling, his lips start to move against Neil's, as though he's afraid Neil might shatter, as though he's touching something sacred.

Then a small sound escapes him, half sigh, half surrender.

His hands lift hesitantly, brushing Neil's shoulders before settling at the base of his neck, pulling him in, answering the kiss with trembling, deliberate certainty.

He clings to him like he's been waiting for this his whole life.

Maybe he has.

Maybe they both have… maybe their souls were always meant to find each other.

In this lifetime, and the next, and the next.

Forever.

"Todd," Neil breathes against his lips, before melting back into the kiss. "Todd…"

Todd answers by sliding his fingers into Neil's hair, tugging gently.

The touch sends a shiver down Neil's spine.

Testing, daring, Neil's tongue brushes Todd's lower lip until Todd gasps a small, startled sound, and then, hesitantly, mirrors him.

They're clumsy, breathless, inexperienced, but somehow it works.

Their rhythm finds itself somewhere between nerves and instinct.

Neil pulls back just enough to cradle Todd's cheek, brushing his thumb across flushed skin. "You're so beautiful, Todd."

Todd's eyes widen, filling fast with emotion before he pulls Neil in

again, kissing him with a new kind of urgency, like he's afraid if he stops, it'll all disappear.

"So beautiful…" Neil murmurs again, barely audible against his lips.

Todd kisses him again, and again, and again, no longer the shy Todd Anderson, not the timid boy Neil first met.

This Todd is hungry.

Desperate.

Grinning between kisses, giving in to the pure joy of being seen, of being wanted.

Neil's hands roam up his sides, slipping beneath his jacket, brushing the soft cotton of his shirt.

The feel of him is intoxicating, the warmth, the shape, the quiet strength.

The unmistakable reminder that he's kissing another *boy*.

It should feel wrong.

Boys aren't supposed to want each other like this.

But it doesn't.

It only fans the fire burning in his chest.

Makes him pull Todd closer.

Kiss harder.

Hungrier.

It feels so right, so perfect, like every moment before this has been leading here.

He wants to bite him, to mark him, to make it real, but instead catches Todd's lower lip between his own, sucking gently.

Todd lets out a soft, broken sound, half whimper, half sigh, and it lights every nerve in Neil's body aflame.

God, he could die happy if he could hear that sound a thousand times

over.

He does it again, adds a small nip for good measure.

“Ah!”

Neil can’t help but laugh at the scrunched-up look Todd gives him , faux annoyance, cheeks flushed, eyes shining.

He’s beautiful like this, open and unguarded.

Adoring.

Neil knows his own face must mirror it, that same helpless, dizzy kind of love.

He rubs their noses together playfully, and Todd laughs into the next kiss, melting right back into him.

Each press of lips, each shaky breath, feels like a promise neither of them yet knows how to name.

When Todd finally pulls back, panting, his face is flushed deep red, lips swollen and glistening.

He looks like everything Neil has ever dreamed of, the image that’s haunted him in quiet moments, made real.

For a dizzy, impossible second, Neil thinks maybe he could stay here forever, right in this heartbeat, with Todd, where nothing else can touch them.

He leans back in, desperate for more, but Todd’s hand meets his chest, gentle, trembling.

“N-Neil… as much as I…” Todd’s voice catches, and he gives a breathless laugh. “As much as I want to keep doing this…” He lifts his wrist, revealing his watch.

The second hand ticks relentlessly. Neil has five minutes to get back on stage.

“Oh… oh, damn it.” Neil huffs, a shaky laugh escaping him. He stumbles a little, falling back against the sink slightly.

Embarrassingly flustered.

Todd giggles, ducking his head against Neil's chest, and the sound is so boyish, so pure, so happy it almost undoes him all over again.

Neil can't resist; he pulls him in once more, kissing him deep, slow, memorising the feel of him, his warmth, the taste of breath between them, before Todd, with a kind of self-restraint Neil could never hope to muster, pulls back again.

"We… we can, uh… we can talk later, okay?" Todd manages, still catching his breath.

He can't seem to stop smiling, that shy, luminous grin that lights him from the inside.

He's blushing furiously, looking so impossibly beautiful that walking away feels like trying to tear himself in two.

Neil exhales, brushing his lips over Todd's brow, then his cheek, and finally one last, lingering press to his lips, brief, reluctant, reverent.

Todd sighs softly against him.

"Okay," Neil whispers, stepping back, his heart still hammering in his chest. "Okay."

For a second, neither of them move. The silence hums, warm and dizzying between them.

Todd's fingers twitch at his sides before he blurts, barely above a whisper, "I really… I really like you, Neil."

The words hit Neil like a spark catching kindling.

His heart leaps; his whole body feels alive, electric.

It takes everything in him not to drag Todd back in, to hell with the play, to just stay here, with him, where everything finally makes sense.

Instead, he just looks at him.

Tries to pour everything he feels into that gaze, all the months of wanting, of loving in silence.

"I really like you too, Todd." His voice wavers, a breathless grin tugging at his mouth. "I really, really, really do."

Todd ducks his head, smiling in that shy, radiant way that makes Neil's knees nearly give out.

He's never seen him look so purely happy.

Neil can't help but pull him in for one final, tender peck on his lips.

A promise.

A vow.

Todd's laugh slips out, soft and breathless, and Neil can't help but mirror it.

They both take a beat to gather themselves, straightening wrinkled collars, smoothing mussed hair.

Catching sight of himself in the mirror, Neil groans under his breath. "Christ, Nancy's gonna kill me when she sees this mess."

Todd giggles again, that low, delighted sound that still feels like a secret, and Neil's laughter joins his, breaking the tension like sunlight through a crack.

They exchange one last look, the kind that says *later*, the kind that says *I can't believe this is real*, before parting ways.

Neil slips down the narrow corridor leading backstage, still flushed, still smiling.

Todd disappears the other way, vanishing into the buzz of the crowd.

Neil watches until he's gone.

His chest feels impossibly light, his heart full to bursting, as if the whole world has suddenly cracked open to let the light in.

He can't stop the quiet laugh that escapes him, the kind that comes only from being truly, deliriously alive.

He turns, still grinning, before starting to run, knowing he only has about one minute to get back out there.

The hum of the building sounds different now, quieter somehow, the faint echo of dripping water in the tiled room behind him.

A door creaks open.

From one of the stalls, a shadow moves. Slow, deliberate.

Neil doesn't see it.

He's already halfway down the hallway, costume brushing against the cold stone wall.

But behind him, a pair of eyes follow him steady, unblinking as his footsteps fade away.

The door swings wider, the hinge whining in protest, and the figure steps forward into the half-light.

The faintest sound an exhale, heavy and controlled fills the silence.

Chapter End Notes

So…. what did we think

Chapter 35: Chapter 35.

Chapter Notes

> This is one of my most unique chapter structures yet so let me know if it works for you as that's how most of the rest of the play chapters will be structured.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil.

Neil just about makes it backstage with two minutes to spare, and Nancy nearly throttles him on sight.

"My goodness, Neil. You're cutting it awfully close," she tuts, though the relief in her posture betrays her.

She can't have been too angry at him, though he does catch a few pointed looks from the cast.

Neil can't find it in himself to care. Not when he feels so impossibly, incomprehensibly happy.

When Ginny taps his wrist and scolds him playfully, he only grins.

He should be stressed. He should feel the pressure winding tight around him…

But he doesn't.

He feels weightless.

Buoyant.

Still half-floating on the memory of Todd's soft lips against his, the warm brush of breath, the dizzying closeness.

The way Todd's hands had gripped his shoulders.

That keenness.

That smile against Neil's lips, like *he* was the lucky one.

Like he had been the one who had been waiting for this.

Like touching Neil was a privilege.

And *God*…

Todd's face as their lips met, shy anticipation melting into radiant warmth.

The sound he'd made when their tongues brushed.

The way Todd had looked after he'd pulled away, barely able to stop himself from leaning back in.

As though stopping hurt.

As though he could have kept going all night, folded into Neil's arms, hearts beating in perfect sync.

Neil's chest flutters; his insides melt.

It's all he can think about.

He feels like he could genuinely take flight.

He never thought he'd get to have this… love, *real* love, something all his own.

He thought he was destined to be alone, or marry whichever suitable girl his father approved of.

Life would go on in black and white… trapped in a neat little television box, acting the part of the perfect man, the perfect husband, the perfect son, never once living anything real.

But now… the world has burst into screaming colour.

How could he ever be lonely again?

He wouldn't be.

Not if he has Todd.

Not if he gets to love that sensitive, gorgeous boy, the smart, quietly brave, generous, thoughtful boy who walked into his dorm one nervous day and completely stole his heart.

There's no more doubt.

It's Todd or no one.

He's ruined for anyone else.

Gloria swoops in, immediately fussing, touching him up as best she can while muttering about how on earth he managed to ruin his hair and makeup just by "*going to the bathroom*."

"Goodness, my boy," Gloria huffs, dabbing something onto his mouth. "Have you been chewing your lips out of nerves? They're red raw!"

Neil blushes. Mutters something about the cold air.

Kiss-bitten lips and hair mussed from Todd's fingers are hardly something he can explain to a seventy-year-old woman.

Though he suspects Gloria, of all people, would be supportive. In her own brisk, no-nonsense way.

From his right, Ginny shoots him a look, far too perceptive for his own comfort.

"Mm-hm," she says, folding her arms. "The 'cold air'. Of course." She leans in, dropping her voice with a mischievous grin. "Funny how it only seems to nip at your *mouth*, Neil. Almost like… someone else got there first."

Neil nearly chokes on his own breath.

"I—I don't know what you're implying."

"Oh *please*," Ginny snorts. "You've got that look. The post-*something* look." She winks and then, after a long pause. "Good for you."

His ears burn, and she laughs softly, bumping her shoulder against his.

A quiet laugh escapes him, he can't help it.

For a breath, he feels almost… *normal*.

Like a proper teenager.

Not a son being sculpted. Not a future being forced.

Just a boy who kissed someone he cares about is being teased for it by a friend.

They'd been risky, of course. Anyone could have seen them. Anyone could've pushed that door open at any moment.

But fate must have been on their side tonight. Somehow, impossibly, they'd remained unseen.

Still, even amidst his inner peace, a little shiver runs through him, quick and inexplicable, the kind that feels like someone walked over his grave.

He brushes it off. *Nerves*, he tells himself. *Just nerves*.

They'll have to be more careful in the future. He knows that.

But God… what a future it suddenly feels like they have.

That's the magic of being roommates, isn't it?

They'll be alone every night. No need for stolen corners or empty bathrooms. No time limits. No fear of being caught.

The thought sends a warm, electric rush straight through him.

They can kiss *whenever* they want.

They can curl up together at the end of the day.

They can hold each other at night, *really* hold each other.

God knows he's wanted to. So many nights, watching Todd sleep, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest, he's had to fight every instinct in him not to slip under the covers and pull him close.

Just to *be* with him.

Not hiding. Not pretending.

Just… *being*.

The thought alone nearly knocks him off-balance.

Because now it isn't a fantasy.

Now it's possible.

Now it's real.

He presses a hand to his ribs, trying to steady the fluttering there, but it's hopeless.

He's ten feet above the stage.

Puck has taken flight, carrying Neil along with him, love spell well and truly seeping through his veins.

As he soars, as he somersaults, he looks down upon what might have been —

the people-pleaser who never said no, who swallowed every feeling, who moved like a wind-up toy in someone else's life.

That Neil stays on the ground.

He fades from view.

The real Neil remains above.

He doesn't think he'll ever come down again.

His cue comes, and Puck surges through him the moment he steps into the light.

Every nerve alive, every breath sparking with mischief.

He moves through the scene like the air has thinned around him, like the stage is bending upward to meet his feet.

The laughter, the energy, the pulse of the audience, it all feeds him, carries him.

And then—

when he glimpses Todd in the crowd, eyes sparkling, cheeks warmed pink, mouthing along to the lines—

Neil feels something lift inside him, something almost holy.

It feels like being chosen by the world.

Like being seen.

Like all of this, the effort, the yearning, the secret dreams, wasn't

foolish after all.

He wants to bottle the sight of Todd.

Keep it somewhere safe, somewhere only he can reach.

He couldn't be happier if he tried.

Tom Perry.

12 hours earlier.

Tom wakes with a start. Checks the bedside clock.

8 a.m.

Too late. Under normal circumstances, Mr. Franklin would have his head for this kind of tardiness, but what does it matter now? He's been laid off. Shoved out like dead weight.

Let them stew without him.

He may as well lie in. May as well take his time.

Odd, though… Patty didn't wake him. She usually makes a point of it. Routine is her one contribution to the household: shake him up at dawn, pass a hard-boiled egg onto his plate, remind him of his schedule.

He sniffs the air.

Bacon.

Tom frowns.

Patty *never* cooks bacon anymore. Not since Dr. Otis lectured him about his blood pressure and Patty took it as gospel. She'd practically emptied the house of anything enjoyable. Breakfast has been reduced

to black coffee and obligation.

But today… bacon? Pancakes? A full spread?

A kindness?

Guilt, more likely.

After last night, she should be guilty. Hiding Neil's activities from him. Letting the boy run wild. Forcing Tom, once again, to be the only adult in the house.

And then the layoff on top of it. He can still feel the humiliation in his bones. The way she looked at him afterward. Pitying. Silent. As if she had expected it.

He dresses slowly, the cold morning bleeding through the thin bedroom windows. Outside, snow is falling hard. Thick, heavy flakes that promise black ice and misery.

A "white Christmas." Ridiculous.

Sentimental nonsense about dangerous weather.

He knots his tie with sharp, deliberate tugs and heads downstairs.

When he reaches the kitchen, he pauses.

Patty has laid out a *feast*: bacon, eggs, pancakes, sliced grapefruit, a whole pot of fresh coffee. The table looks like something out of a magazine.

What on earth is the woman playing at?

"Good morning, dear."

Patty's voice is soft, a little shaky. The woman has always had a nervous disposition, that part is nothing new, but the *breakfast* certainly is.

Tom arches a brow.

"Is it my birthday?" he asks, with a laugh entirely stripped of warmth. The spread before him is an extravagance, far beyond their usual frugal morning ritual. A waste of their supplies.

And yet… the smell is tempting. He hasn't enjoyed a proper meal in

two years. Not since the doctor's lectures. Not since Patty appointed herself the guardian of his arteries.

"I just wanted to… apologise," she says quietly. "For my insolence yesterday. I shouldn't have hidden the truth from you."

She offers him a small smile as she places bacon onto his plate, careful, cautious, like offering peace to an unpredictable animal.

Tom sits with a huff, resigning himself to the break in his diet. One piece of bacon won't kill him. Probably.

"Hmm. I appreciate the sentiment, Patricia," he says, spearing it with his fork.

The bite is divine. A small, involuntary sound escapes him, a quiet groan of pleasure, and Patty brightens at once. For a moment, her face softens into something young, something familiar. The girl she once was flickers through: shy, hopeful, steady.

He had once loved her very dearly.

At first, he'd told himself it was convenience, a sensible union between two sensible people. But if he's honest with himself, Patty had been someone he watched for a long time at church.

Not a beauty. He'd always known that. He wasn't a handsome man either. But she had a gentleness he'd admired. A kind of quiet order that felt like safety.

Where Roger Perry, his own father, had been chaos incarnate, a drunk, a gambler, a man who could lose the family's savings on a single night and leave their home in foreclosure… Patty had represented the opposite.

Her family was modest but respectable. Christian, traditional, disciplined. Her father a Harvard man, a banker. Not rich, but steady. Reliable.

Patty herself had taught Sunday school with a firmness he respected. No fuss, no dramatics. She'd seemed like someone who would make a fine parent.

Someone who would never let life slip into disorder.

He had loved her… adored her, almost.

He remembers thinking she would anchor him.

He remembers believing stability was something a good man *built*.

But the reality of marriage…

The reality of life…

The reality of raising a son who refuses to understand what is expected of him…

All of it had carved away the softness.

Hollowed the warmth.

Left behind this brittle thing between them, routine, duty, expectation.

Patty stands across from him now, fidgeting with her hands as though afraid even this gesture might be wrong. Trying, in her small, timid way, to repair something that feels decades beyond repair.

And Tom, chewing his bacon, feels that familiar, heavy mix of affection and disappointment settle in his chest.

“I trust… I trust you slept well?” Patty says at last, lowering herself into the chair across from him and placing a single pancake onto her plate. She tries for casual, but her hands tremble just slightly.

He shakes his head. “Not *well*, per se. But enough.”

He spears another piece of bacon. Patty doesn’t flinch, doesn’t caution him about salt or cholesterol.

She must really be sorry.

“I myself couldn’t sleep much,” she admits, voice dipping. “I was… uh... so sorry about yesterday.”

Her gaze skims his face but never quite lands there.

Tom nods, waiting. She’s leading somewhere.

“Thank goodness Neil is listening to… to reason,” she says at last, her smile stiff and strained. “Thank goodness he’s agreed not to act.”

Tom scoffs.

Thank goodness indeed.

The boy's ridiculous insistence on prancing about a stage like some pansy would've made a mockery of them all.

Of Tom.

Of their name.

Harvard men *don't* act that way.

"Yes," Tom says, taking another bite. "The boy did finally listen to reason."

He thinks of the call he placed to Braden Military School the night before.

A fine institution. Discipline. Order. Men made there, not coddled.

A friend's son had once flirted with the idea of dance, of all things. Braden straightened him out. He's a doctor now, an oncologist, successful and respectable.

A credit to his family.

Welton remains Tom's preference, of course. The scholarship wasn't easy to come by. But Braden will stay on the table if Neil shows signs of slipping. If he tests boundaries. If he puts childish whims over his duty.

He'd seemed to understand last night. Disappointed, sure, but surely he knows sacrifices *must* be made.

Patty watches him closely as he eats.

It's unnerving.

He says so, and she startles. "Sorry, dear. I just… I worry for our boy. He's seemed more… distant. Don't you think?"

Tom shrugs. He genuinely doesn't know what she means.

Yes, the boy has acted out recently. Broken a few rules.

But *distant*? No.

Much the same as he's always been, polite, soft, overly sensitive,

easily guided.

There's nothing to worry about.

He's at school, becoming a man. The childish spark must fade eventually, the wonder, the hobbies, the silly dreams.

Good riddance.

That's the process.

That's growing up.

That's the making of a Perry.

Neil.

Backstage, watching Ginny absolutely *nail* Hermia, watching her disappear entirely into the role like she was born for it, Neil grins so hard his cheeks hurt.

It fills him with a pride he didn't know he could feel a communal pride, shared, warm, the kind that makes this whole ragtag cast feel like family.

He feels invincible.

Immortal.

Beautiful.

He's doing what he loves.

And his people… *his people*… are out there watching the best version of him unspool right in front of them.

This is the only future that feels like living.

For a moment, just a moment, he lets himself believe the world might bend to meet him halfway.

That maybe, after everything, all that time, that dedication, that perfectionism…

…maybe it finally meant something.

Maybe he's finally broken free.

Maybe he's no longer indebted.

Maybe he's going to be okay.

For once he's—

From the corner of his eye, the doors at the back of the hall ease open.

Not unusual.

Long play, crowded audience, people slip out all the time.

But Neil stills.

Freezes.

Because the silhouette that steps inside is unmistakable.

No.

No, no, *no*—

He shouldn't be here.

He should be at work.

He should still be in the office.

He shouldn't... he can't… be here.

A tremor crawls up Neil's spine.

How… how did he even *know* to come?

Did someone tell him?

Did he read something?

Hear something?

Some old, buried part of Neil, the small boy who flinched at raised voices, who swallowed tears, who learned to hide his joy like contraband, stirs under his ribs.

That part shrinks.

That part wants to run.

Hide in the wings. Pretend he was never here.

He could vanish, let the understudy take over, lose Nancy's trust forever—

But at least he'd have a chance of acting again.

He actually considers it.

For one delirious second, he considers bolting.

But as his father steps fully into the aisle, Neil knows there's no escape.

Not really.

He draws in a sharp breath.

No.

He needs to *use* this.

He needs to show him.

It's the only chance he'll ever get to prove who he is. Who he *really* is.

Not the son.

Not the heir.

Not the future doctor or the family reputation or the extension of Mr. Perry's ambition.

Neil.

Neil Perry. The person. The boy almost-but-not-yet a man. The boy who is cracking under the weight of everything he's been told to be, everything he can never live up to.

Maybe—maybe—somewhere deep beneath the stone of him, his father still has something human left. Some warmth. Some love not tied to control or expectation.

It's naïve.

Neil knows it is.

But that tiny hope, that tiny flicker... it's the only thing he has left.

Keating's voice echoes through his mind like a lifeline:

"*If it's not a whim for you, prove it to him. With your conviction, your passion. Show him that. And if he still doesn't believe you… then when you're out of school, you can do anything you want."*

Okay, Keating…

Neil straightens, breath shaking.

Okay. I'll show him. I'll try.

Nancy touches his shoulder. "Neil. That's your cue."

He turns slowly, heart pounding so hard he feels it in his throat.

This is it.

The face-off.

His last chance.

Maybe—maybe this time—

Maybe he'll be enough.

Maybe his father will finally see him.

Not as the soldier.

Not as the trophy.

Not as the investment.

Just… as Neil.

“Come on, Neil,” Nancy whispers again. “Here’s your crown. Let’s go.”

Neil breathes in. Here he goes.

He steps out, the lights illuminating him.

No turning back.

Never again.

Tom Perry.

4 hours earlier.

Defrosting the car takes exactly as long as Tom expected, too long.

He scrapes at the windscreen, muttering under his breath, cursing the cold, the ice, and God Himself for the idiocy of winter.

He’s so absorbed in his annoyance that the sharp, high-pitched voice behind him makes him jerk.

“Tom?”

He turns, instantly regretting it.

Mrs. Marks.

The ridiculous woman herself.

She’s dressed as though she’s heading to a cocktail bar instead of standing in subzero temperatures, a miniskirt, kitten heels, and a short fur coat doing absolutely nothing to keep her from developing hypothermia.

“Oh. Hello again.”

He returns to scraping, hoping she’ll spare him whatever frivolous chatter she’s itching to unleash.

Though admittedly, she’d served her purpose yesterday. Without her tip-off, Neil’s nonsense would’ve continued unchecked.

“Terrible weather, isn’t it?” she says with an exaggerated shudder, pulling her coat tighter. “My Lizzy has come down with the most dreadful cold. She’ll be unable to perform tonight. Isn’t that just awful?”

Tom nods absently. He couldn’t care less whether Lizzy Marks appears in that silly little play.

“Thank goodness for Neil, right?” she continues. “Other than Elizabeth, he’s the best performer out there. Nancy Darvis’s prodigy, I swear.”

Not anymore, Tom thinks, smug.

Still, he nods politely. “Ah, well. I believe the boy has also come down with something. Pity, isn’t it?”

He aims for sincerity, but his self-satisfaction bleeds through.

Mrs. Marks tilts her head, frowning.

“*Oh*… that’s strange. I could have sworn I saw him when I passed Henley Hall earlier. Walking into the final rehearsal.”

She laughs lightly. “But perhaps I was mistaken.”

Something in Tom’s chest goes very still.

Then tightens.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

Like a fist curling around his ribs.

A hot flush creeps up his neck, prickling beneath his collar.

The faintest tremor of outrage gathers in his jaw.

If she's right—

If the boy truly disobeyed him—

If Neil dared to… to defy him... *again*—

Tom exhales once through his nose, sharp and thin.

No.

No, he tells himself, *the woman is foolish.*

Dramatic, prone to exaggeration.

She must have been mistaken.

She *must* have.

Though she *had* been right on the mark last time.

The dawning slowly racks through him.

Neil *didn't* quit.

Neil deliberately deceived him.

Again.

It was becoming a pattern.

The ice on the windscreen begins to crack under the pressure of his scraping, or perhaps under the pressure of him beginning to truly, dangerously boil.

Fine. He thinks as he starts the engine. *Fine*.

If it's theatrics the boy wants, then it is theatrics he shall get.

Neil.

For most of his scenes, Neil manages to stay distracted… or rather,

hyper-focused.

Fixed on performing as he never has in his life.

Because this could be the last time.

And if it is, then goddamn it, he's going to savour every second.

Every line.

Every laugh from the crowd.

Every moment of freedom disguised as character work.

He keeps his gaze forward.

Keeps it locked on his cues, his partners, the stage lights—

anywhere but the back of the hall.

Anywhere but *him*.

But he feels it anyway.

The stare.

Heavy.

Hot.

Piercing through the dark like a spotlight meant only for him.

He doesn't need to look to know.

He can *feel* his father's eyes burning into him, searing,

measuring,

judging,

dissecting.

No matter.

Puck is invincible.

Puck isn't afraid.

Puck is free—

and if Puck is free, then for these fleeting breaths,

these trembling minutes under the lights…

so is he.

But when it comes to that final monologue —

the words he'd poured over, rehearsed obsessively, tried a dozen different ways to land —

the words he'd whined to Todd about,

convinced he'd never get right,

the words he'd studied with Keating until the meaning cracked open like a seed—

Everything leads to *this* moment.

To *this* delivery.

Neil finds himself speaking them directly to his father.

To Tom Perry, who still stands at the back of the hall, stony-faced, refusing even to take a seat, as though sitting would be a concession, a weakness, a sign that he might be moved.

Neil turns toward him, thorns on his head, leaves twined around his wrists, looking perhaps the farthest from the son Tom Perry imagines.

There will never be another moment like this.

Never another time when Tom will see him so bare, so unguarded, so vulnerable.

His soul exposed, waiting for a warmth that may never come.

If he can't accept him now... he never will.

Puck looks straight at Tom Perry.

The frown.

The tight jaw.

The heaving, disapproving chest.

And Neil speaks directly to him.

Tom Perry.

By the time he reaches Henley Hall, Tom just about knocks the door off its hinges.

The moment he steps inside, a nervous-looking usher, all freckles, thick spectacles, and a blazer slightly too big for him, hurries over. The boy can't be more than eighteen.

He wrings his hands like he wishes he could melt into the floor.

"Uh—hey, sir, do you… do you have a ticket?"

Under Tom's stare, the boy drops his gaze to his shoes, shoulders curling inward.

"My son is in the production," Tom snaps. "This is family business. I've no interest in watching this… charade. I just need to speak with him."

The usher gulps so visibly that Tom almost hears it.

The boy shifts his weight from foot to foot, clearly torn between protocol and pure fear.

Wuss.

"O-oh. Well—uh—the interval will be soon, sir. But the actors won't come out until afterward, so—"

"This is urgent."

The growl in Tom's voice makes the boy flinch.

"Oh—of course, sir. If there's a problem, I can send a message backst—"

“This is nobody’s business but *mine* and my son’s,” Tom cuts sharply. “You’d do well to back off, young man, and not dispute your elders.”

“I—I didn’t mean— I’m just supposed to—”

“Good God, stop stammering. You’re giving me a headache.” Tom’s patience hangs by a thread. “How long does this damn thing go on for, anyway?”

“Uh… well, the interval is fifteen minutes, and then another hour for the closing of the show…”

An *hour?* Ridiculous.

A waste of time, money, and common sense.

“I don’t care to mingle with the chatty Cathys out there,” Tom mutters. “Is there anywhere private I can wait?”

“I’m not really supposed to let—”

“Christ almighty, I’m not going to *rob* the place.” His irritation spikes. “Is there an empty classroom? A staff room? That’s all I’m asking.”

The boy hesitates, then wilts under Tom’s glare.

“There’s… uh… the teachers’ lounge,” he admits, voice barely above a whisper. “A lot of the staff use the restroom there. It’s got nice cubicles and a couch in the lounge area. No one really goes in during shows, so…”

“Point me in the direction.”

It takes the foolish child another five minutes of stuttering and leading him in circles before Tom finally arrives.

The “lounge,” as the boy called it, is hardly a lounge at all… more a large bathroom with four stalls, a row of sinks, and a small alcove containing a battered couch.

Still, it’s functional.

Bland. Quiet.

Good enough.

Tom exhales sharply and lowers himself onto the couch.

Over an hour of this nonsense.

Why anyone needs that long to recite sonnets no one understands is beyond him.

He was never an arts person. His money never stretched to operas or gallery fundraisers or whatever elaborate spectacles the wealthier Welton parents threw themselves into. At every insufferable dinner with the Daltons, he has to endure their smug recitations of the latest concertos and ballets.

Too much money and not enough sense, he thinks.

Where was the practicality?

Why waste fortunes watching grown men pirouette around in tights?

Still… when Neil becomes a Harvard man, he'll have to attend these things. Network. Fit in.

But attend, not *participate*.

Not stand under the spotlight himself.

The rage bubbles again, hot and acidic.

Tom almost wishes he had a bourbon to take the edge off, and he very rarely drinks.

Just as the thought crosses his mind, the door creaks open.

Footsteps.

Someone is coming in.

Tom stiffens. The last thing he wants is to make small talk with some ponce of a teacher. Without thinking, he slips into the nearest stall and eases the door shut, peering through the narrow crack as he steadies his breath.

It's the Anderson boy… Neil's roommate.

The kid splashes his face with water, sniffles, then disappears into another stall, blowing his nose loudly. *Typical.*

Of course, *he* would know all about Neil's disobedience. Would know more than Neil's own father.

Tom's irritation spikes.

Camaraderie was one thing.

Encouraging weakness was another.

Tom's jaw tightens.

Then the door opens again.

He glances out through the crack, and his blood runs cold.

Neil.

His son, in the flesh.

Humming to himself as he washes his face, completely unaware he's being watched.

He's in full costume.

No *tights*… but not much better.

Leaves. Paint. Glittering nonsense draped over him like some forest sprite.

Tom feels a slow, awful heat crawl up his spine.

The boy disobeyed him.

Flat-out *disobeyed* him.

He should take the chance now.

Step out. Confront him. Drag him home if he must.

Make the boy understand… truly understand… that this rebellion ends tonight.

He'll mention Braden Military School.

Remind him that one more step out of line, one more hair out of place, and that will be his future.

Orders, drills, discipline.

The cure Tom has always known he may eventually have to use.

But before he can act, the Anderson boy exits his stall, grins, sniffs once, and then—

They embrace.

Not the rough, indifferent greeting of boys.

Not a friendly pat on the back.

A real embrace.

Warm. Familiar.

Soft.

A *lovers* embrace.

Tom's breath catches.

His mind stalls.

Neil leans in close, head bowed toward the other boy as though confiding something sacred. As though giving himself over.

"You're gonna give me strength… as you always do."

The words are spoken so gently, so full of something tender and awful, that Tom feels his stomach twist.

"*And… how would I do tha—"*

Neil's eyes shine.

Todd's lips part on a trembling inhale.

And then—

Time slows.

Their lips meet… a cautious brush at first, a single pause of trembling uncertainty.

But it doesn't last.

Todd moves closer.

Neil's hands slide into Todd's hair.

Their mouths fit together with terrifying ease, as though this is routine, expected, *normal*.

As though this isn't an abomination.

Tom feels every muscle in his body lock, seized with horror.

He should burst out.

End this display of hedonism… of—of *sin*… of utter madness.

He should shout.

Drag Neil home.

Put a stop to this softness that has been poisoning him since childhood.

But he can't move.

He is frozen, forced to watch his son throw his future away with every lingering touch.

Every sigh.

Every sinful, tender second of it.

Anyone could walk in.

Anyone could see this *filth* and associate it with the Perry name.

What is the boy thinking?

This is what softness does.

This is the rot that grows when a child is not broken in early enough.

God knows Tom tried.

God knows he *warned* himself this could happen if the boy wasn't corrected.

If he kept indulging in fantasies and dreams and softness.

And now here it is.

The worst possible proof.

Delusions of love.

Love that cannot…must not exist.

The boys finally part, slowly, reluctantly, as though it pains them.

As though separating requires effort neither wants to give.

An eternity passes before their hands fall away.

He waits until both boys have stepped out, until their footsteps fade down the hall, before Tom finally dares to move.

He opens the bathroom stall door only a fraction, inch by inch, as though afraid the scene might somehow still be there waiting for him, replaying itself.

But the room is empty. Quiet.

Too quiet.

He slips out, breath tight in his throat.

Neil is already halfway down the corridor, adjusting his costume as he goes. Then he breaks into a run, frantic, determined, clearly racing back before the second half begins.

Tom watches him flee, watches him vanish around the corner in a flurry of green leaves and ridiculous thorns.

And something cold settles in his chest.

Perhaps the boy who just ran down that hall was the real one.

Perhaps the other boy… the son he thought he raised… never existed at all.

A terrifying thought.

A *humiliating* one.

This queerness, this obscenity…

It must have lived in him all along.

Lurking beneath the polite smiles, beneath the soft voice, beneath every "*yes, sir.*"

Waiting for the right moment… the right weakness… to surface.

Waiting for corruption.

His jaw tightens.

There *was* a common factor.

A catalyst.

Someone who encouraged softness, who encouraged imagination, who encouraged the boy to think for himself instead of following his father's lead.

Mr. Keating.

Of course.

The so-called educator with his unorthodox methods.

The man who filled Neil's head with nonsense about passion, and dreams, and individuality.

That is who ruined him.

That is who poisoned his boy.

Tom's hands curl into fists as he makes his way toward the main hall. His steps are sharp, echoing down the corridor like cracks forming in stone.

This ends tonight.

He will put a stop to it —

to the acting,

to the disobedience,

to the delusions,

to whatever softness has taken root in Neil and twisted him into something unrecognisable.

Once and for all.

Neil.

Neil takes a breath. Here he goes.

"If we shadows have offended,

Think but this, and all is mended—

That you have but slumbered here

While these visions did appear."

Listen, Neil pleads silently.

Please. Listen.

Hear what I'm telling you.

"And this weak and idle theme,

No more yielding but a dream,

Gentles, do not reprehend.

If you pardon, we will mend."

I've done nothing wrong.

Nothing but follow a dream.

How can a dream offend you?

How can playing pretend shame you?

"And, as I am an honest Puck,

If we have unearnèd luck

Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,

We will make amends ere long."

I'm telling you the truth. The real truth of me.

I am who I am. I want you to see me. To know me.

I am your son.

If you recoil… if you turn away… at least I didn't lie tonight.

Isn't that worth something?

Can't you see this is where I'm meant to be?

"Else the Puck a liar call."

Neil's voice catches.

Tears sting hot behind his eyes.

Not yet.

Not now.

Three more lines.

Three lines that might be all he ever gets.

He plants his feet.

He projects.

He makes sure the words reach the very back of the hall.

Tom Perry does not blink.

Does not look away.

"So good night unto you all.

Give me your hands if we be friends,

And Robin shall restore amends."

And then Neil steps back.

Disappears into the painted forest behind him.

The audience erupts into applause as the curtains sweep shut on opening night.

And perhaps —

just perhaps —

they close on Puck altogether

Chapter End Notes

Welp.

Chapter 36: Chapter 36.

Chapter Notes

> Hellooo again folks, I'm hoping to get some quicker chapters out to you but feeling perfectionist about this fic. This chapter has been written and rewritten a couple times so I hope the final product works haha!
>
> Thanks as always if you've ever clicked on my dumb little fic and sent me love on it, it never fails to make my day. Love y'all <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie.

The second Neil takes his bow, Charlie lets out a yell that practically rattles the rafters. Todd, Keating, Meeks and Pitts join in immediately, a whole chorus of whoops and whistles cutting straight through the polite applause of the general crowd.

Charlie swears Neil must hear them, must *know* it's them.

How could he not?

How could he not feel how completely *loved* he is?

If anyone can make it be known, it's the poets, it's Charlie.

He meets Todd's eye and they grin at one another. The flush across Todd's face, the pure look of pride lighting him up, the way he came back from the interval looking like he'd been struck by divine intervention.

Something must have *transpired.*

Charlie knows what a guy looks like after a bathroom make-out. And Todd's reddened lips and slightly crooked collar?

Yeah. Dead giveaway.

He doesn't need to ask who with. Of course he doesn't.

Finally, he thinks, delighted.

Finally those idiots got their shit together long enough to show each other what they mean.

Another win for Neil.

He keeps getting those these days.

Charlie hopes they never stop coming.

"Gentlemen," Keating whispers, leaning in conspiratorially. "Now would be an excellent time for a *yawp*, don't you think?"

He laughs as the boys immediately huddle and begin to count down, then bellow Neil's name as loud as humanly possible.

"NEIL!"

He beams with pride as the rest of the cast push Neil forward.

Neil flushes, bows his head, bashful as a saint being worshipped.

And isn't he just?

A saint of a boy. Their gallant leader, their inspiration.

And more than that.

Charlie's oldest friend. His *family*. His one constant.

Charlie feels close to tears, watching his best friend front and centre, finally being showered in the attention he's always deserved.

He made it. He *got through the play.*

He finally fucking *did it.*

Truly defied the Perry empire. Finally showed the world who Neil Perry really is.

The nerves from earlier fade like mist.

Nuwanda stands tall.

Charlie's cheeks hurt from grinning as they spill into the lobby, chattering and laughing.

Meeks and Pitts are already deep in conversation about the show's themes, and Keating's got an arm around Todd, whispering something

that makes the kid glow even brighter.

Charlie scans the crowd for Knox.

He *knows* he's here, he'd spotted him at the interval before Knox mysteriously vanished. No idea how things went with Chris.

He rises onto his toes, bouncing a little with impatience. Knox never usually wanders far.

He's always been more comfortable tucked safely inside the pack.

And then he sees him.

Charlie goes still.

Knox emerges from the hall hand in hand with Chris Noel.

Ah.

That explains the interval disappearing act.

Probably didn't want the guys heckling him in front of the girl he's been writing poetry about since September.

Charlie watches them for a moment.

The way Chris glances up shyly as Knox tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear.

Jesus, he works fast.

Earlier she'd seemed unsure, practically running in the opposite direction, but clearly things have changed.

He supposes it makes sense.

Knox is practically prince fucking charming.

Swoopy golden-brown hair, big brown eyes, lashes that could start wars. And the guy invented chivalry. Of course Chris flocked to him.

Of course he won her over.

That's the Knoxious charm in full swing.

A prickle crawls up Charlie's spine, but he shakes it off.

Cold draft from the door, that's all.

Knox finally glances up, eyes darting across the room until they land on Charlie.

He grins, bright and conspiratorial, it's enough to reawaken Charlie's excitement, reminding him of their plan.

Neil has no idea what's waiting for him in the cave tonight.

The lanterns, the makeshift feast, the secret stash of liquor, the whole damn brotherhood ready to crown him king of the world.

Only he and Knox know about it.

Cameron would've blabbed. No question.

Meeks and Pitts would've tried to engineer a sound system (they needed to *not* draw every teacher's attention), and Todd…

Well, sweet kid that he is, *would* have kept the secret *but* Charlie wants to see his face when Neil walks in.

A happy Neil means a happy Todd. And Charlie plans to revel in it.

They'd started stockpiling contraband the second Neil burst into their dorm announcing he'd gotten the part.

Nuwanda knew immediately that the world would need to celebrate properly. And properly always meant alcohol.

Charlie had been sneaking Scotch and bourbon from his father's "absolutely-for-show" liquor cabinet, the man owned enough bottles to survive prohibition twice over, while Knox had quietly lifted a sleek bottle from his family's dinner table on his last visit home.

Then Knox had gone full rebellion mode, a mode Charlie delights in, and swiped three more bottles while his parents argued about the market crash.

Charlie had clapped him on the back so hard he'd nearly winded him.

"*Look at you*," he'd said. "*Breaking rules… sneaking about, stealing. Color me impressed, Knoxy.*"

Knox went red but proud, and Charlie still feels that warm pulse of affection now.

Yeah. Tonight's going to be legendary. Neil deserves no less.

Charlie jerks his chin at Knox meaningfully, eyebrows wiggling like mad.

Knox answers with that tiny, conspiratorial grin. Everything's ready.

Charlie shoots him a wink.

Set on my end too, he hopes it conveys.

Knox nods.

Chris, confused but seemingly amused, nudges him, and he leans down to kiss the top of her hair.

Charlie looks away too fast.

He tells himself it's just courtesy, giving them a moment.

No idea why it feels sharper than it should.

It feels too intimate, too *soft*, like something he wasn't meant to witness.

As they file outside, he watches Pitts blushing as Meeks leans in close, whispering something that turns Pitts an alarming shade of pink.

The two move in sync without even trying, like matched bookends that have always belonged side by side.

He watches Todd smiling softly to himself, clearly replaying whatever gentle, private moment he and Neil shared earlier. Keating is watching him with quiet pride, observant as ever. He's probably figured it out too.

Well Knox isn't the only one of their group that's matched up.

Everyone else has a special someone too, whether they've admitted it to themselves or not. Though there is always–

Charlie's gaze lands on Cameron.

He sighs.

Just you and me, pal. The only two in the whole group not paired off.

God help us.

He snorts under his breath. Of all the guys to be spiritually single with, the stiff walking beside him would be his very last choice.

Still… he supposes it's good.

Most of the boys have followed Keating's path, toward love, toward romance, toward that quiet, brave rebellion of choosing happiness.

Charlie's done it too… just in a louder way.

His rebellion doesn't whisper. It howls.

It jumps off rooftops, dives into freezing rivers, announces itself with trumpets and fireworks.

But when it comes to affection?

To vulnerability?

To letting someone see past the Nuwanda glow?

Yeah.

Not a chance.

That part stays locked down, silent as stone.

He's a lone wolf. That's the deal.

Meaningless hookups and quick make-out sessions are all he'll ever get.

Bits of fun, here, there, everywhere.

No strings.

Quick, painless, drama-free.

Just how he likes it.

Or at least… well—

No. It is.

It *is.*

He's still thinking on that… still ruminating on the strange little ache blooming somewhere deep down that he refuses to fully acknowledge… when a sharp voice cuts through the crowd.

"Excuse me. Move, please. Coming through."

Charlie turns, and at first his chest leaps with excitement.

Neil.

Back in his regular clothes. Making his way through the crowd. Charlie opens his mouth to call him over—

Then he freezes.

Mr. Perry walks just ahead of him.

Of course. He should've recognised that clipped tone, that stiff, angry posture.

Neil trails behind him like a lost child, head lowered, shoulders curled in.

A shadow instead of a person.

Oh shit. What now?

Knox, Meeks, and Pitts start clapping, calling to Neil as they spot him.

Todd grins, practically glowing as he reaches out for him—

But Neil only meets Todd's eyes long enough to give the smallest, most devastating shake of his head.

"*I can't,*" he mouths.

His eyes dart nervously.

He keeps walking.

The two of them disappear toward the doors, Mr. Perry's car already pulled up outside like he'd planned the escape hours ago.

Keating spots Neil and hurries after him, pride radiating off him like heat. The man looks ready to embrace him.

"Neil!" he calls, tapping his shoulder, Charlie and the rest of the guys

in close pursuit.

Neil turns, helplessly, and for a moment his expression cracks open, craving that warmth, that guidance, that unconditional belief only Keating ever gives him.

“You have the gift,” Keating breathes. “What a performance. You left even me speechless. You have to stay with—”

But he doesn’t get to finish.

Mr. Perry steps between them, shoving Neil aside like he’s nothing more than a stray pet blocking his path.

“Get in the car,” he growls at his son.

Neil doesn’t look back.

Doesn’t speak.

He obeys.

Walks toward the car like a man walking to the gallows.

To Keating, Mr. Perry leans in close, rage unmasked and unrestrained.

“Keating. You stay *away* from my son.”

He turns sharply and marches toward the car.

Keating stands frozen, speechless, helpless.

Charlie’s heart slams against his ribs.

No.

No, no, no.

The *plan*, the celebration, the whole night they’d built for him… gone.

Stolen. Crushed under that disgusting man’s heel.

He hasn’t even had a chance to tell Neil how wonderful he was.

How wonderful he *always* is.

How proud Charlie is of him.

He steps forward before he even realises it.

He can't let him go.

He *can't.*

"Neil!" he shouts, meeting his best friend's eyes.

But what looks back at him is hollow.

A shell.

Like Neil's been scooped out and replaced with something obedient and afraid.

In his gaze, Charlie tries to pour everything he can't say aloud:

Don't get in the car.

He can't force you.

Come back with us. We'll figure something out.

Please… please, don't go with him.

But Neil doesn't budge.

He opens the car door.

Slides inside.

Doesn't even let himself look at Charlie for more than a flicker.

"Neil?" Charlie shouts again, louder now, stumbling toward him, the urge to yank him out of the car almost unbearable.

Before Mr. Perry can climb in, Charlie tries, stupidly, desperately, to appeal to him.

"Mr. Perry, come on!" he bursts out.

He moves closer, hand half-lifted, instinct, pure instinct, but Keating grabs his arm firmly, pulling him back before he does something reckless.

"Don't make it any worse than it is," Keating murmurs, and he sounds smaller than Charlie has *ever* heard him.

Normally, Charlie would protest, maybe even shove forward anyway.

But one look at their steady, unshakable teacher, now pale and stricken, shuts him up instantly.

Keating knows best.

Maybe… maybe it's better to let Mr. Perry think he's won this round.

Let him believe he's in control.

Then, when he lets Neil return… maybe after the weekend, the Poets can regroup.

Between Meeks's brains, Pitts's calm, Knox's sheer optimism, Todd's nurture, and Charlie's own brand of chaos, they'll come up with *something*.

He glances around at the downtrodden bunch, all watching the taillights of Mr. Perry's car shrink down the road.

It'll be okay, he tells himself. *It has to be.*

But when he remembers the look on Neil's face, that smallness, that sadness, he feels something tug hard in his chest.

Such a brutal contrast to the light in Neil's eyes onstage.

To the way he had been open, unguarded, *alive.*

Todd and Keating stand rooted to the curb, still staring long after the car turns the corner.

They keep staring as though Neil might reappear if they just don't blink.

They look devastated.

Charlie feels it too.

But the group needs Nuwanda now, the loud one, the buoyant one, the one who keeps everyone moving instead of sinking.

He clears his throat and turns to Knox, Meeks, Pitts… *and* Chris, still at Knox's side.

"Should we walk back?" he says, trying to sound casual. "Fresh air

might do us all some good, eh, gentlemen?"

Then he catches sight of Knox and Chris's still-entwined hands.

"And, uh… and lady," he adds with a little bow. "If you so wish, madam."

Chris giggles, and Knox shoots him a grateful look.

See? Charlie thinks. *Supportive. Look at me go.*

He turns back to Keating.

"Is it okay if we walk back?" he asks.

But Keating hasn't moved.

He's still staring at the empty stretch of road where the Perry car last was, frozen, as if he can't quite process that the world hasn't frozen with him.

"Captain?" Charlie tries again, louder.

Keating startles, meets his eye, and nods.

Still no words… and that alone terrifies Charlie more than anything else tonight.

He'd try to comfort him, tell him it's not his fault. That Mr P. has always had a stick up his ass. But there's no point. He knows the man wouldn't want him to. Would rather he take care of himself, of the whole group.

The man probably needs some time alone anyway.

Time to breathe. To think.

To sit with the guilt Charlie can already see creeping into his posture.

Charlie nudges Todd gently.

A signal.

Come on, bud.

Todd hesitates, glancing at Keating, then back to the road, as though Neil might suddenly rematerialize out of thin air if he just waits long

enough.

As though sheer longing could bend the universe.

When nothing happens, Todd finally turns and follows Charlie.

Charlie wishes he could pull him aside, get a plan going, *anything* to soften the blow.

He can't though, not now.

Todd would never open up in front of the whole group.

Regardless of how accepting Charlie knows they are, it's sensitive information. When they talk it needs to be alone.

As they walk, Todd trails behind the group, silent, while the others chatter in low, uneasy voices about the play, about how brilliant Neil was, how excited they are to tell him when he comes back.

Charlie keeps glancing over his shoulder, checking that Todd's still with them.

Trying not to let his own fear show.

It'll be okay, he tells himself.

He's going to be okay.

I'm just being paranoid. Just being weak.

Neil is strong. Neil's always been strong. He'll be okay.

But the gnawing feeling doesn't stop.

His insides feel strangely hollow, like someone has scooped out the part of him that keeps him steady.

The anticipation, the dread, is almost too much to stand.

Todd.

Todd walks a little behind Charlie, his steps small and quiet.

He hasn't said a word the entire walk back.

The others talk softly about the play, how incredible Neil was, how unforgettable his monologues were, how proud they all felt watching him.

They talk about what they'll tell him when he comes back.

Not one of them mentions Mr. Perry.

Todd is grateful for it.

One word, one *name*, might shatter him completely.

By the time they reach Welton, it's only 11:30.

Barely an hour has passed.

It feels like a lifetime.

It feels impossible that the world is still turning.

The image of Neil being led away, silent, shrinking, trying so hard not to look terrified, has lodged itself behind Todd's eyes.

Every time he so much as blinks, it replays in full, cruel detail.

His chest feels strangled by it.

Every breath sharp.

And then there's the other thing.

The thing that should have changed everything tonight.

They kissed.

He kissed Neil.

Neil kissed him back.

The love of his life had held him close, pressed their lips together in soft, trembling certainty, touched his face like it was something precious, whispered the words Todd had been scared to imagine.

He *liked* him.

He wanted him too.

This should have been the best night of Todd's entire life.

This should have been the night they finally talked.

The night they finally said the things they've been tiptoeing around for months.

The night the doubt vanished.

They could've kissed again.

Laughed again.

Fallen asleep in the same bed with no fear, no guilt, no hesitation.

Just wanting.

Just honesty.

Just them.

Todd had wanted to tell him everything… that Neil changed his life, that Neil made him brave, that Neil was the only light that had ever truly reached him.

He knows he's being dramatic.

There *will* be another chance.

There has to be.

But something in his ribs gnaws at him, whispers at him, tightens like a warning:

What if you never get the chance again?

Mr. Perry is ruthless.

Cruel.

Unpredictable.

Neil isn't safe with him.

Todd knows that now with painful clarity.

He wants to kick himself for not doing what Charlie did… for not speaking up, trying to get to him, fighting, doing *something*.

Anything.

But he hadn't.

He'd frozen.

Again.

Still a coward.

He's only brave with Neil at his side.

His throat catches; he swallows hard, stopping short as the others head toward the cave.

The cold wind bites at him, sharp, but the shiver that runs through him isn't just from that.

His arms wrap tightly around himself as he stands alone just outside the trees.

Well… not quite alone.

Charlie lingers near him, kicking at the snow with restless energy, unusually quiet.

The usual sparkle in him has dimmed; something more cautious sits behind his eyes.

He keeps glancing at Todd, as though he's waiting.

For what?

Todd isn't sure.

Todd swallows hard, throat burning as he steps closer.

Words sit heavy at the back of his tongue, raw, insistent, impossible to speak.

He opens his mouth once, shuts it with a snap, jaw locking.

He can't say it. He can't.

But the pressure in his chest keeps building and building, squeezing upward, unbearable.

He needs to speak to someone.

Needs to exhale this breath he's been holding for what feels like hours.

Charlie might mess around, might tease and poke and swagger, but when it really matters… when it's important… he's always there.

He's loyal.

Kind.

A softie deep down, no matter how much he pretends otherwise.

And most importantly… he's *here*.

Still hovering near Todd like he's waiting for him to speak first.

They stand there a few moments more, watching their breath swirl into little clouds.

The cold bites at Todd's skin, but it's still more bearable than the idea of going back to that dorm room… seeing Neil's bed empty, neatly made, waiting.

Waiting for someone who might not be allowed to return.

Todd shivers, hugs his arms tighter around himself.

Charlie finally turns fully toward him, head tilting, all bravado gone.

"Hey… Todd? You all right?"

The words are soft, gentle. Not teasing, not loud, just *steady*.

Supportive.

And it's that kindness, that undemanding, unwavering kindness, that breaks him.

Todd shakes his head, sharply, snow scattering from his hair.

His breath hitches, and then the words claw their way out of him.

"Charlie—"

He gasps, stumbling over the shape of the truth.

“I… I can’t… I—”

He presses a fist to his mouth, like he could force the pain down, but it’s too late, it’s rising, spilling, cracking open.

“I love him,” Todd chokes finally, voice small and wrecked.

“I… I love him.”

The confession drops into the frozen night like something both sacred and ruinous.

Todd’s chest heaves; his eyes blur with heat.

“I really… I… I—”

Silence stretches.

Not long in real time, but in Todd’s head it’s an eternity. A chasm.

Charlie doesn’t look disgusted.

Doesn’t recoil.

Doesn’t stare at him like he’s something shameful.

But Todd still braces, muscles locked, breath caught, preparing for the blow anyway.

Just in case.

He needn’t have bothered.

Charlie’s face breaks, not in horror, but in *acceptance*. Whatever swagger he wears as Nuwanda melts clean away.

It’s just Charlie now.

The boy.

The friend.

The brother.

“Todd,” he says softly, voice steady but thick, “I know. I know, it’s okay…”

His hand closes around Todd's arm, warm, firm, grounding.

Todd shakes his head, the words spilling out of him in fragments.

"No… I know you know that I… *care*, but I really… I really, really— I…"

But Charlie steps closer, tilting his face down until Todd *has* to meet his eyes.

His voice gentles further, low and sure.

"No, Todd. I *know*."

Charlie's hand slides down Todd's arm, fingers curling, firm and steady… and Todd understands.

"I've known for a while," Charlie murmurs. "And it's okay. It's okay."

It shouldn't be a surprise.

Keating had hinted.

Charlie had never been subtle.

But hearing it spoken aloud, the truth, the acceptance, the softness in Charlie's voice, hits Todd like a blow.

Gentle hands anchoring him, warm breath in the cold night, someone *seeing* him and not recoiling.

Something inside Todd snaps cleanly in half.

His knees buckle.

The world tilts.

And he folds forward, helpless, collapsing into the nearest warmth.

But Charlie catches him immediately, arms locking around him without hesitation, pulling him tight against his chest in one solid, certain motion.

"I love him," Todd lets the sobs wrack through him finally, the words ripped straight from somewhere deep.

"God, I love him— I love him so, so much— I love him—"

The tears come messy, shuddering, unstoppable, once the dam cracks, everything pours out.

He's half-collapsed against Charlie, no strength left to hold himself upright, but Charlie doesn't let go.

Not for a second.

He only holds Todd tighter, one hand rubbing circles between his shoulder blades with rough, protective tenderness.

"I know," he murmurs, voice cracking with him.

"I know. It's okay, Todd. I promise… I promise… it's all going to be okay."

But then Charlie's own breath stutters, tears slipping freely, as though he's been holding them in.

They cling to each other in the snowfall, united by grief, fear, and a love too immense to name.

The world narrows to this: two friends, holding on as tightly as they can, keeping each other from splintering.

Neither notices the footsteps approaching until a warm hand settles on Todd's shoulder.

Knox.

He doesn't intrude with questions.

Doesn't ask what happened, why they're clutched together, why they're shaking, or why Todd looks like the sky has fallen.

He simply stands with them in the cold, the quiet settling like fresh snow.

After a breath he speaks, voice gentle:

"Hey, you wanna come in? No pressure. I can give you another minute if you need it."

Todd and Charlie glance at one another, faces blotchy, eyes rimmed red, still trembling but steadier now.

For a moment no one moves, but Knox is patient, doesn't rush them.

Then Charlie nods, a small, fragile nod, the kind that means *we'll come, but slowly*.

Todd wipes his face on his sleeve, feeling a little embarrassed, but Knox just pretends not to see, offering him a steadying hand instead.

Together, wordless and exhausted, they fall into step behind Knox.

As they walk, Todd keeps one hand curled in his coat pocket, gripping the fabric hard, the last remaining thread keeping him upright.

But the glow of lanterns already flickering through the trees tells him he isn't walking alone into the dark.

Not tonight.

He has his Poets, and between them, they'll make sure nothing bad happens to Neil.

Chapter End Notes

> See you soooooon (hopefully) and promise there's some joy to come … just uh wait a few chapters ok?

Chapter 37: Chapter 37.

Chapter Notes

> Hope everyone's having a lovely weekend, the next few chapters are drafted and structured just need some edits and at first I'd incorporated this one with those but I thought this was best as a standalone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil.

The ride home is silent.

Unnervingly so.

Neil had expected the berating to start the second the doors slammed shut, the second the engine turned over. He'd braced himself for it, his father's voice, low and cutting, slicing through the dark.

But Tom Perry keeps his eyes on the road, jaw locked, face an unmoving mask.

Somehow it's worse than being screamed at.

It isn't just anger.

It isn't even just disappointment.

It's colder than that.

Controlled. Calculated.

But why?

Why such *venom*?

Surely a silly school production doesn't warrant the hatred simmering beneath his father's skin.

Neil stares down at his lap, fingers twisting together.

He should be celebrating.

He should be in the cave with the others, letting Charlie tease him about the costume, letting the boys tell him how brilliant he was.

And *God*, he was.

He was good.

He was *really* good.

He knows he was.

Rehearsals had only hinted at it… how natural it felt, how right. But when the curtain rose, when the lights hit him, something inside had unlocked.

It wasn't just acting. It was freedom.

And when he looked into the crowd and saw them… how could he not soar?

Charlie, getting to his feet at the most inappropriate moments imaginable, whooping like a fool.

His fool.

Meeks whistling through his teeth, bouncing up and down in his seat.

Knox shouting his name without an ounce of restraint.

Pitts grinning wider than Neil had ever seen him, nearly crying from pride.

Even Cameron, rigid, rule-bound Cameron, caught up in the magic, eyes shining up at the stage, finally allowing himself enjoy something that isn't studying for finals.

And Keating… his *Captain*… his mentor glowing with pride. The only adult who has truly seen him.

And then there was Todd.

Oh, Todd.

That beautiful soul who was a breath away from being his.

The boy who'd kissed him, without hesitation, without fear.

And Todd's face… God, Todd's face when he'd pulled back, stroked Neil's hair, held him close. Adoration written across it openly, finally unhidden.

He knew he looked at Todd the same way.

And they were supposed to *talk* about it.

They were supposed to stay up till dawn in each others arms, learning each other's lips, making up for lost time, whispering secrets in the safety of their dorm room.

Instead, Neil sits in this car, the cold fogging the windows, his father's controlled fury filling the silence like smoke.

Six months ago, he would've stumbled over apologies, spinning lies about the play being some Harvard-adjacent achievement.

Trying desperately to mold the truth into something his father might approve of.

But he doesn't want to.

Because it's not the truth.

And he can no longer live without the truth.

Now that the dam has broken, it's authenticity or nothing.

And at least, if nothing else, he had one night of being everything he always wanted.

The play.

His friends.

Todd.

For those few hours, Neil had believed nothing could shatter what he felt.

Defying his father had felt worth it.

He'd known Tom Perry wouldn't approve. Of course he had.

But what difference did it make?

He suspects he could become President of the United States and his father would ask why he wasn't President of the Universe.

He could cure every disease known to man and Tom would sneer that he'd wasted time sleeping instead of curing faster.

If Neil married, Tom would accuse him of distraction. If he didn't marry he'd be a recluse, a loner.

If Neil had children, they'd have to be brilliant, flawless boys destined for Harvard.

Joy didn't matter.

Fulfillment didn't matter.

Love didn't matter.

Just control.

So what difference did it make to rebel?

He might as well have done what he wanted all along.

At least he got one chance.

One night.

What more could he ask for?

The car pulls into the drive.

The tires crunch over the snow, too loud in the silence.

Tom still doesn't speak as he kills the engine.

His hand rises to his chest, briefly, almost absently, as if steadying a sudden tightness.

A sharp breath through his nose.

But his expression doesn't crack.

When he steps out of the car, he misjudges his footing and stumbles, just a fraction, barely more than a hitch in his balance.

He closes his eyes for half a second, jaw clenching, as though tamping something down.

Anger, Neil assumes.

Fury simmering too hot, burning him from the inside out.

Before Neil can ask, or even process it, Tom straightens, mask snapped back into place.

He marches briskly around to Neil's side and yanks the door open.

"Get inside," he snaps, eyes fixed anywhere but on his son. "Your mother is waiting."

Neil does as he's told, practically shaking with adrenaline... or fear, which one he's unsure of.

His mother is waiting in the study.

She looks more distressed than Neil imagined, eyes red-rimmed, hands clasped tightly in her lap.

She too won't meet his eye.

Had he disappointed her too?

Let her down?

She isn't like his father, she never raises her voice, never commands, but she never contradicts him either.

Wifely duty over motherly duty, he supposes.

Regardless, Party doesn't seem too happy to be in this position, she watches her husband, something almost akin to pleading flickering across her face as Neil takes the armchair opposite them.

He knows what comes next.

He waits for it, like a man awaiting a sentence.

He tries to steady himself.

Tries to think of Todd.

Todd's shy little half-smile.

The dimple that appears only when he's truly happy.

The soft hitch of his breath when they kissed.

The way his eyes shone, bashful, astonished, hypnotised when Neil had called him beautiful.

And he was… he'd never been more beautiful than in that moment, only hours ago.

God… he wants him here now.

Wants Todd holding his hand, telling him he's brave, giving him just one person in his corner while the walls close in.

He clings to that image like a lifeline.

After a long, heavy pause, Tom clears his throat.

"We're trying very hard to understand why it is that you insist on defying us."

Neil almost laughs at that.

Us.

Tom loves that word, loves the illusion of unity it gives him.

As though he and Patty have discussed this, as though she's had the chance to voice anything at all.

Although to Tom, his thoughts are automatically her thoughts. His word is law.

Not that Patty would speak up even if she were allowed.

Sweet as she is, his mother has no backbone.

"Whatever the reason," Tom continues, voice clipped, "we're not going to let you ruin your life."

Ruin his life.

Neil stares down at his hands, nails digging into his palms.

What life?

The one he's been forced to live since the day he was born? The one that has never, ever belonged to him?

He doesn't *want* Harvard.

He doesn't want medicine.

He doesn't want the suffocating future Tom has carved into stone.

His real life, the only life that feels right, is onstage.

It's the rustle of costumes, the smell of greasepaint, the quiet hum before the curtain rises.

It's laughter in the dressing room, the shared pulse of a cast breathing as one.

It's the Dead Poets Society.

It's his band of brothers who encourage him, challenge him, love him despite every crack and flaw.

It's Todd.

His love for Todd… whatever future being fully with him would entail.

Hidden, maybe.

They'll have to be careful.

Invent excuses, dodge suspicion, steal moments in back hallways.

But Neil doesn't care.

They'll know the truth. Their love will be theirs.

No one else's.

It's the truest thing he's ever known.

If he can love Todd… if Todd is his… then *that* is living.

The alternative is unthinkable now.

But…. he thinks, probably a little pathetically, maybe it isn't hopeless.

Maybe he can still keep performing…

He would just need to be more secretive this time.

Hide it better.

Cover all if his tracks.

Just one more year.

He can graduate, turn eighteen, and then he'll be free. He'll leave.

Maybe with Todd.

Maybe they'll start over somewhere far away, where no one can dictate who they are allowed to be.

The thought sparks something faint inside him, a fragile light. For the first time in hours, he almost feels hopeful.

He just has to hold on a little longer.

Hold on until eighteen.

Hold on until freedom.

Hold on until he can run.

Until legally, he can be free.

The hope is small… it's fragile, hanging on by a single thread, but it's something.

It's enough to keep him breathing.

For a moment.

But that moment is fleeting.

But Tom has other plans.

He leans forward, folding his hands in his lap with deliberate calm.

In spite of this, the vein in his forehead looks about ready to burst, his body tense. Neil knows to prepare for cutting words, for a proper berating.

What he isn't prepared for though, is what he says next.

"Tomorrow," he says, "I'm withdrawing you from Welton and enrolling you at Braden Military School."

The words hit Neil like a physical blow.

A sudden, brutal shock that knocks the breath from his lungs.

Military school.

And not just any military school.

He's heard of Braden.

Braden.

In Washington, D.C.

It isn't down the road.

It isn't even in the same state.

It may as well be a world away.

The room tilts.

He stares at his father, unsure if he misheard.

Surely… surely this is too extreme, even for Tom Perry.

He's always insisted Welton is the only school good enough for him…

The only institution strict and reputable enough to "shape him properly."

And Neil's a good student.

Not even that, he's a *great* one.

He works hard, earns top marks, follows every rule…

Except the ones that crush him.

Why take him away from Welton?

Why abandon the school he's spent years molding Neil into?

What is Braden supposed to offer him that Welton doesn't?

Unless…

Unless Tom doesn't care about "opportunity" at all.

Unless this isn't about his future.

Unless it's about control.

Tom doesn't give him a second to speak.

"You're going to Harvard," he says flatly, "and you're going to be a doctor."

The words drop like stones.

Cold. Final.

Absolute.

This isn't punishment.

This isn't discipline.

This is eradication.

A targeted strike against the most important part of him.

The first time he's shown his real self, his joy, his passion, his talent… and this is the response.

Destroy it.

Remove it.

Cut it out of him like a disease.

How is this the consequence of him simply being himself?

What did he do that was so wrong?

Neil's eyes sting; his chest constricts.

He looks to his mother, without thinking, without hope, just pure instinct.

For what, he isn't even sure.

A word.

A protest.

A single ounce of defiance on his behalf.

But Patty's eyes are glassy, tears slipping down her face in silent trails.

She wants to say something.

He can see it, trembling behind her composure…

But she won't.

She *never* does.

She is just as trapped, and she will not save him.

It's up to him.

It's always been up to him.

"But that's ten more years," Neil whispers.

The number sits heavy in his chest.

Ten years of obedience.

Ten years of suffocation.

Ten years of pretending to be someone who doesn't exist.

Ten years away from the boys who have become his home.

His brothers, his chosen family.

Ten years away from Todd.

Ten years living states apart from the person who held his face tonight and kissed him like he mattered, like he was worth something.

Ten years of losing everything that makes him him.

Ten years of being reshaped, erased, broken down and rebuilt into someone his father can stomach.

He doubts Tom would even allow him to write to his friends.

He's probably already demonised them, same as Keating, painting them all as corrupting influences, weaknesses to be cut out.

If only Tom knew the truth.

Knew how they've kept him sane these past years.

How they're not just schoolmates or familiar faces in hallways.

How they're his family.

Chosen, not assigned.

If he can't write…

How will he ever see them again?

And even if he could…

How would he even begin to explain any of this?

How would he tell Todd what he means to him… what he is to him?

How he's braver and stronger and more powerful than he could even imagine. That he awoke a part of Neil he thought had died long ago.

How would he tell Charlie he'll always be his brother, no matter where life throws him?

That he doesn't always need to put on a facade, that just being Charlie is enough?

That being Charlie has *always* been enough.

How would he tell Keating, the one adult who ever truly saw him, how much he changed him, how much his teaching saved him?

How can he tell any of them anything if he's locked away like a prisoner?

How would he ever see them again?

He doubts his father will even let them say goodbye.

How would he survive it?

He has to fight this.

He *has* to.

His voice cracks as it rises, desperation spilling over.

"Father, that's a lifetime!"

The words echo through the room, thin, desperate, trembling.

He hears how he sounds.

Like a child on the verge of a tantrum.

But he can't help it. His insides feel like they're turning inside out.

Organs twisting.

Lungs constricting.

Heart thudding so violently it might burst.

He's trapped he's trapped he's trapped…

Tom scoffs. "Oh, stop it. Don't be so dramatic."

Neil's breath stutters.

Don't be dramatic.

How is he meant to stay composed when his life is being torn from him piece by piece?

When Braden means no joy, no love, no air?

"You make it sound like a prison term," Tom says, clipped and final.

But isn't that exactly what it is?

A sentence.

Correction.

Rehabilitation.

Braden Military isn't about success; it's about obedience.

About breaking a boy's will until nothing remains but silence and compliance.

Tom doesn't see that.

Tom doesn't see *him*.

Something inside Neil splinters.

His scholarship.

His friends.

His dreams.

All gone… just like that.

For the crime of wanting something different.

For the crime of wanting anything at all.

He looks at his father, *really* looks, and sees only contempt.

Thinly veiled behind the performance of parental concern.

There's more to this.

There has to be.

Tom's fury isn't just about the play.

Maybe it never was.

It's about *him*.

About what he is.

About what Tom Perry has always feared he might be.

Neil has felt it for years, his father studying him, gauging softness, monitoring every spark of joy, every flicker of individuality.

Waiting for confirmation of the weakness he despises.

And tonight… maybe he found it.

His acting.

His openness.

The way he became Puck with his whole heart.

Maybe that was the final proof.

Neil isn't sure how much his father knows about Todd… about his feelings for Todd specifically, but he knows Tom doesn't approve of their closeness.

He's seen the looks, the tightening of his father's jaw whenever Todd's name is mentioned.

Although…

No…

Tom only entered the hall after the interval.

After the *kiss*.

He couldn't have…

There's no way…

But the panic spikes hard and fast.

It's not impossible.

It's not even improbable.

The timing.

This escalation.

His rage that doesn't quite fit the crime.

His father is harsh at the best of times but this…

Why else uproot him from Welton entirely?

Why else banish him across the country?

This isn't a punishment.

It's *exile*.

Not just stripping him of the play…

But of Welton.

Of his friends.

Of the only place he has ever felt glimpses of himself.

The school Tom once worshipped.

The achievement he'd once been proud to display.

The realization hits cold and deep.

If Tom suspects…. if he *knows*…

Then Neil will never escape him again.

Tom's voice cuts through his thoughts, sharp and final.

"You don't understand, Neil. You have opportunities I never even dreamt of… and I'm not going to let you waste them!"

He's shouting, but Neil barely hears the words anymore.

They don't matter.

Nothing he says matters.

He's going to lose everything anyway, his friends, his freedom, Todd, so he may as well try.

A hot, furious bubble rises inside him.

He wants to hit something.

To run.

To scream.

Instead, he forces himself upright, stepping close enough to his father that his shaking legs nearly give out.

"I've got to tell you what I feel!"

His voice trembles, but it carries, raw, desperate, defiant.

For a moment, he almost believes he's breaking through.

Mrs. Perry rises, wringing her hands, voice quivering. "We've been so worried about—"

But Tom doesn't even turn toward her.

He slices her off mid-sentence.

Her voice dies instantly.

"What? What?" Tom snaps, leaning forward. "Tell me what you feel. What is it?"

The venom in his tone makes Neil recoil.

This isn't a father's voice.

Not even a man trying, however clumsily, to understand.

It's the voice of a puppeteer tugging strings.

A lion tamer cracking a whip.

Tom doesn't want a son.

He wants possession.

A trophy.

A testament to him, his ambition, his legacy, his imagined greatness.

A future retirement plan in human form.

For years, Neil has tried to convince himself it was love underneath.

Twisted, misdirected, suffocating, but love all the same.

Standing here now, he knows the truth:

It isn't.

It never was.

The realization hits heavier than he expects.

He should have known.

Should have seen through the facade long ago.

Should never have hoped that Tom Perry would see him, truly see him, as anything more than an extension of himself.

A real person.

Living, breathing, thinking.

Tom would've been happier with a robot.

Something that obeyed without question.

Something that felt nothing at all.

"Is it more of this… this acting business?" Tom sneers. "Because you

can forget that. What? What is it?”

Neil already knew this was coming.

But hearing it aloud still lands like a blow to the ribs.

The silence stretches.

A lifetime contained in a few seconds.

What does he feel?

He tries to search for the answer, really tries, but there’s nothing left.

No hope.

No air.

No future.

Just a hollow ache where his heart used to be.

A chest full of thorns.

A soul scraped clean.

What does he feel?

His father has won.

He’s stripped him of everything that made his life worth anything at all.

What does he feel?

That he’s never going to see the people who truly understand him, perhaps ever again.

What does he feel?

What does he…?

What…

There’s nothing left.

No spark, no rebellion, no hope he can cling to.

Just a numb, hollow quiet spreading through his chest like frost.

“Nothing,” he whispers at last.

And he means it.

Chapter End Notes

AAAH anyway see you soon!!! <3

Chapter 38: Chapter 38.

Chapter Notes

Charlie centric moment anyone?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie.

December 11th 1949.

“You can’t catch meeee!”

“Oh yeah? Watch this!”

Charlie barrels after his best friend, laughter burning in their lungs.

Winter bites at their cheeks and noses, but neither boy notices, they are in battle.

Neil is captain of the battalion.

Charlie is the sworn enemy of the nation.

Not two little kids in hand-knitted sweaters from Mrs. Perry and moth-bitten gloves.

Two soldiers.

Heroes.

Their trikes weren’t made for snowy streets, but that makes it better.

Every skid is a victory.

Every wobble on the ice is worth it, proof they fought hard, proof they survived.

If they crash into a hedge?

Brilliant.

Battle scars.

Charlie can already imagine the stories he'll tell in school the next day, standing on a desk to make sure everyone hears:

"*We nearly died. It was glorious*."

And Neil would laugh, swear it was the truth if anyone dared question it.

He always lets Charlie run away with an idea.

Never tells him to tone it down or be less loud, less rambunctious.

Neil is just about the only one who doesn't call Charlie *too* much.

And for that alone, Charlie would back him up forever.

No questions asked.

"Neil! Charles!"

Mrs. Perry's voice carries from far down the street, from the Perry house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

The porch lights are a faint yellow glow through the winter dusk.

The boys groan.

Home already?

It feels like they've only just started.

Their battlefield dissolves, trikes, snow, enemy territory and suddenly they're just two kids standing in the street.

It's getting dark already, only just gone four o'clock.

Charlie wants to yell at the sky for cheating them.

"I guess we better go back," Neil sighs, small and reluctant. He looks exactly how Charlie feels.

Charlie doesn't want to go inside, eat dinner, and then wait to be ferried home.

The Daltons never collect him themselves, of course. They'd never inconvenience themselves so much. They always send the help.

Tonight it'll be Miss Jennifer.

As far as nannies go, she's near the bottom of the list.

Bitter old lady who seems to hate kids. Especially boys.

Especially Charlie.

Goodness knows why.

If anyone ever asked him, Charlie would say he's a great kid.

Charming. Fun. Adventurous. Knows a lot of words.

Bad ones too… which surely proves intelligence.

But Miss Jennifer always tuts at him.

"Children should be seen and not heard," she'll proclaim, shushing him if he so much as breathes too loudly.

Charlie thinks that's the stupidest rule in the world.

He was born to be *loud*.

To be heard.

To take up space.

And Neil, sweet, bright Neil, never tries to shrink him.

Which is why Charlie will never let anyone shrink Neil either.

"Orrrrr…" Charlie's face lights up. Neil's eyes sparkle instantly, like he already knows what's coming.

"We could do a quick race round the block. Just one more time. *Pleeeease*!"

He gives Neil his best puppy-dog eyes.

Neil's own are far more convincing, he's got that look down but it seems to work, as he only laughs and climbs back onto his trike.

"Okay, okay, you're on. Last one back eats all the broccoli!"

That's all the invitation Charlie needs.

They charge around the corner, whooping and hollering, tyres skidding over the snow-packed road.

They're perfectly matched, Neil shoots ahead, then Charlie catches up, then Neil pulls in front again.

Every time one gains an inch, the other steals it back.

The street rings with the kind of laughter that only exists when you're seven and the world is small and perfect.

Charlie is so focused on winning, on being able to gloat for hours, that he doesn't notice Neil isn't at his shoulder anymore.

He reaches the imaginary finish line, triumphant, already preparing his victory speech. He glances back…

Neil is nowhere near him.

He's lying face-down in the gravel, a few feet back his trike askew on the ice.

Charlie's stomach drops.

He sprints back, boots slipping, heart hammering. Neil's cries become clearer the closer he gets, high, panicked, sharp with pain.

When Charlie reaches him, the sight makes him wince.

Neil's face has taken the brunt of the fall, his cheek scraped raw, blood beading along his lip.

One of his front teeth is hanging at an awful angle.

Charlie doesn't think. He just scoops him up, best he can anyway, Charlie's never had the best arm strength.

"Oh Neil! Oh no! This is all my fault!"

He cries because Neil is crying. Because he should've been paying attention. Because it *hurts* to see his friend hurt.

Neil, still shaking, presses his face into Charlie's coat.

"No, it was *my* fault," he whimpers. "I'm so stuh-stuh-stupid… I didn't b-brake fast enough. Oh, Charlie… d-daddy is gonna be suh-so-so-so *mad*."

Charlie shakes his head quickly.

“No he won’t! It was an accident. All kids have accidents.”

But another wave of sobs hits Neil, hard enough to shake his whole little body.

“B-but it’s puh-picture day tomorrow. F-for the class C-christmas card.”

He hiccups between breaths as Charlie rubs his back, desperate to comfort him.

“D-daddy said I gotta look my best or—or else…”

The last words dissolve into another cry.

Before Charlie can think of anything to say, frantic footsteps hit the pavement behind them.

He looks up.

Mrs. Perry is running toward them, apron flapping, heels clattering, panic written all over her face.

“Oh Neil, oh my *baby*!”

Charlie loosens his hold, and she sweeps Neil up into her arms, clutching him tight.

“Are you hurt, honey? Can you move your legs? Is anything broken? Tell me.”

Neil shakes his head, tears streaking his scraped cheek.

“N-no, mommy. But my face—my face—”

He buries himself against her shoulder and sobs.

“Oh sweetheart, we’ll fix that. I promise. It’s going to be okay.”

She strokes his hair, voice soothing, but Neil doesn’t calm. Charlie can see it, the fear in his eyes isn’t about pain.

“Duh-Duh-Daddy’s gonna be mad,” he whispers. “He’s gonna be *so* mad.”

Charlie waits for her to deny it, to say Tom Perry won't be angry, that accidents happen, that everything's fine.

But she doesn't.

Something flickers across her face, worry, resignation, before she turns to Charlie instead.

"Charles, are you hurt? Did you fall too?"

He shakes his head. She exhales in relief.

"Good. Would you mind grabbing Neil's trike? I'll carry him home."

Charlie nods and takes the small metal handlebars.

They walk back in silence, only Neil's choked sniffles filling the darkening street.

The trikes squeak along the icy path on either side of Charlie, small wheels juddering over frost.

Inside, Mrs Perry works quickly, washing Neil's face, dabbing ointment over raw skin.

The boy sobs the whole time.

"Oh sweetie, please… put on a brave face. Please don't cry," she whispers.

Charlie frowns.

Of course he'll cry. He's *hurt*.

But Patty keeps glancing at the hallway clock, voice tight, scared rather than annoyed.

Then a sound at the front of the house, wheels, a car engine, makes her flinch.

She shushes Neil frantically as his sobs begin to rise.

She turns to Charlie, eyes wide.

"Charles, dear, can you wait in Neil's bedroom just a moment? I'll call Miss Jennifer. You'll have to be taken home for dinner. We, ah… we don't have enough, I'm afraid. Silly me. I forgot."

Charlie nods, though he doesn't believe her for a second.

She probably just wants to make sure Neil's okay, without Charlie distracting him with his antics.

Or to explain the incident to her husband without Charlie there, as he tends to cut into personal conversations at the best of times.

Maybe Mr. Perry *will* be cross.

Unfairly so, but he's a short-tempered man, and Charlie doesn't like him one bit.

Still, *he* wouldn't dare give him lip.

Even Charlie knows not to mess about when Mr. P is involved.

He runs circles around his own father, and teachers practically groan when he marches into a classroom.

But Mr. Perry?

Different story.

Still, this was all just a silly accident.

All kids fall, all kids cry.

What's the big deal?

Charlie's sure Neil is just being dramatic.

Surely it won't be *that* bad.

In Neil's room, Charlie plops onto the rug and grabs the nearest toy… the model train set. His favorite.

Neil has the *best* trains, passed down from an uncle who was a toymaker.

Proper painted engines and carriages.

Tracks that make loops and bridges all across the carpet.

Nothing fancy.

But *really* fun.

And that's what Charlie cares about.

Charlie forgets everything for a moment, pushing the engine over the little ramp so it comes flying down again.

He makes the sound effects under his breath, little "*choo*" noises and whistles, adding crashes and explosions whenever it jumps the rails. He always makes it super dramatic.

Neil usually giggles and joins in, though he always tuts when Charlie makes all the passengers die a violent death.

"That's not a happy ending!" he once protested, bottom lip sticking out. *"I* want *a happy ending."*

Charlie usually listens.

But he does love the screams of terror as the trains come off the tracks, so sometimes he still kills the lot.

Today, the room is quiet.

Down the hall, he can hear Mrs Perry moving around quickly. Cupboards opening. Water running.

Neil's small voice, hiccupping through his still falling tears.

Charlie hears it, but doesn't really listen.

He sets two trains side by side, pushing one faster so it shunts the other off the track.

Cccccrash.

He grins at the noise.

Maybe next weekend he'll be allowed to sleep over, a rarity, but sometimes Patty allows it.

He hopes they'll play pirates again.

He loves that game.

Neil does too.

Neil is *really* good at the voices.

Better than the Punch and Judy puppeteer who comes to school when the class has been especially good.

They can use the duvet for the ocean and the pillows for islands. Neil always likes that.

Charlie feels a fizz of excitement just thinking about it.

It's not guaranteed, nothing ever is, but he can be persuasive.

He'd have Neil at his house instead, it's bigger and Charlie has more toys, but Mr Perry doesn't like Neil staying away.

Maybe he misses him terribly when he's gone.

Still, Neil's house is fun too, though they need to use their imaginations more.

Charlie pushes the bedroom door open a crack to see if he can hear anything.

Not a sound.

He steps out a little.

A shiver runs through him, the hallway is colder than before.

Probably the back door was left open. Or maybe someone came in.

He thinks about going downstairs and asking Patty to make them hot chocolate before he has to go home.

Marshmallows if she has them. That would be nice.

The front door clicks open.

Voices drift from the hallway, muffled, hurried. A deeper one joins them.

Charlie frowns to himself.

He can't hear what's being said, but Neil's crying sounds different now, sharper, almost swallowed.

Maybe Patty's being too rough with the soap. Miss Jennifer is much the same.

Charlie remembers when she got shampoo in his eyes one time and he cried for ages.

It's probably something like that.

Poor Neil. Some water would fix it right up though.

He goes back into the room and begins to line up Neil's toy soldiers, ready for a new battle.

That's when the yelling starts.

He's not sure it ever stops after that.

December 11th 1959.

The boys don't stay in the cave long. They drink some of the liquor that was meant for Neil's surprise, but it feels almost too depressing to enjoy it too much.

Neil's absence is *loud*.

Chris and Knox seem the only two feeling any semblance of joy, in their own world, a bubble of young love.

They sit together on Knox's coat, her small figure swallowed in his suit blazer.

Knox must be freezing, but his face doesn't show it.

He looks so happy.

Overjoyed, even.

His strong arm is around her, her head resting on his shoulder as they

gaze at one another like no one else exists.

The sight sends a sharp burn through Charlie's chest.

He's not quite sure *why*.

He's not *jealous*.

It's not that.

Chris is gorgeous, all sunshine and softness, but she's not Charlie's type.

He prefers girls with a bit of bite.

Always has.

And besides, normally he's a *great* wingman.

So why does watching Knox with her make him feel like something's turned over inside him?

What is *wrong* with him?

He shakes himself a little, remembering he's emotional, worried.

Probably feeling a little pissed because Knox should be just as worried about Neil as he is right now, especially being Neil's second oldest friend.

But just that thought crossing his mind makes Charlie feel unbelievably mean.

He's being unfair.

Knox *does* care.

He has been nothing but kind tonight.

He's *always* kind.

He *should* get to be a little selfish sometimes, indulgent for once. It's what Charlie's always urged him to do…

So… why does it hurt to look?

Let him be happy, a voice inside urges. *God knows he deserves it.*

He takes a swig of whiskey, looking away, handing the bottle to Todd after.

Todd takes it wordlessly and takes his own generous gulp.

That's the surprising thing Charlie has learned about Todd, sweet, quiet Todd can take liquor like a grown man, cigarettes too.

Never wobbles.

Never slurs.

Charlie has never even seen him tipsy, even when he's drunk as much as, if not more than, the rest of them.

He files that away. Something to ask about, one day.

Not now.

Not when Todd has practically just had his heart ripped out of him.

The cave feels colder by the minute. The walls seem to press in.

Charlie feels a little sick.

No one is talking that much. Not as a group, anyway.

Meeks leans in close to Pitts, murmuring something that makes Pitts huff through his nose. Pitts has an arm behind him… not quite around him, but close.

Close enough that it's almost intimate.

They're practically touching, and neither seems to notice. Or care.

Cameron sits a little apart, eyes fixed on his shoes. His expression is unreadable. He looks like someone doing complicated sums inside his head, weighing outcomes, risks, consequences.

Charlie knows exactly where his mind has gone.

To Neil.

The play.

Mr. Perry's rage.

The Society.

He hopes Cameron isn't regretting everything tonight, doesn't take all of this and fold it into yet another cautionary tale for himself.

Charlie knows the look of a boy with strict parents; he'd seen it in Cameron from day one.

Obedience isn't inbuilt in his personality, it's for survival.

A feeling stirs in Charlie's chest, uncomfortable, unfamiliar.

Sympathy.

Sympathy for *Cameron*.

That chills him almost more than the cold air.

He doesn't like it.

He doesn't wanna give the guy the benefit of the doubt, he truly doesn't… but he sometimes can't help it.

Cameron is the way he is for a reason, Charlie *knows* that.

Maybe he'd go over, talk to him, say something stupid and Nuwanda-like… fun to ease the tension a little.

Maybe he would, if the weight in Charlie's own chest weren't so crushing as it was.

He can't get the images out his head.

Hasn't been able to since it happened.

Seeing Neil small and mute beside his father, feeling Mr. Perry's eyes on him, cold, full of cruelty, how he'd obediently stepped in the car.

The look on Tom Perry's face as he dragged Neil away, the pure hatred in his gaze, the contempt aimed at Keating.

The way Keating had shrunk in on himself.

Their normally composed Captain suddenly seeming unbelievably small. Diminished.

It had all hollowed Charlie out.

It had felt wrong. So wrong.

It still does.

Wrong that they're here now, all together in the cave.

Wrong that Neil is all alone with that man.

All alone with… HIM.

He wants to speak up, to yell that they need to go rescue Neil. He needs them there…

But how can he?

The others know Mr. Perry has a mean streak, but the severity of it, what happens once the door closes, is something only Charlie has seen.

How can he explain it?

How can he make anyone understand? This isn't nothing… This isn't parental strictness, not just that…

They'll think it's just typical Charlie Dalton dramatics.

It's his father, they'd say.

It's just family. He wouldn't hurt him. They're blood.

They don't know the half of it.

As far as he's concerned, Neil isn't safe in that house.

He thinks of scraped cheeks.

A child's cry.

A father's bellow.

Charlie shudders. He can't stand this.

He gets to his feet.

He can't stay. Not tonight. Not after what he saw outside of Henley Hall.

"Come on," he mutters, to no one in particular. "I'm walking back."

No one moves at first.

Then Todd nods. Quiet, steady. He stands and hands the bottle to Cameron, who shockingly takes a sip.

“Me too. I’m… a little tired. It’s been a long day,” Todd says, yawning for good measure.

His voice is soft but final.

The others nod, murmers of goodbye as the two slip out of the cave.

For a heartbeat, Knox’s eyes meet Charlie’s.

Concern flickers there gentle, steady, unmistakably Knox.

Prince Charming. Even now.

Charlie musters what he hopes passes for a smile.

Knox doesn’t need to know how cracked open he feels.

Not when he’s finally holding the girl he’s talked about for months.

And yet, when Knox turns away to kiss Chris’s hair softly, as she nuzzles into his neck, something tightens in Charlies chest again.

That same strange jolt from before, quick and sharp. He blinks it down.

I’m just out of sorts, he tells himself. *Out of my mind. Being unreasonable. Typical Charlie Dalton.*

He pushes the thoughts aside and follows Todd out into the night.

The cold hits Charlie like a wall.

The breeze, harsher than before, cuts right through his coat.

Christ.

Winter’s in full swing.

He pulls his coat tighter around himself as they walk, both of them moving faster now, eager for warmth and walls.

Once they reach the dorms, they lower their voices out of habit. Months of secret meetings have taught them how to slip through Welton unnoticed.

At Neil and Todd's door, Charlie pauses.

"You gonna be okay?" he asks. "Alone, I mean?"

Todd stares into the room for a long second. His eyes flick toward Neil's empty bed. His throat works.

The room feels too quiet.

Too still.

He sniffs, then breathes out through his nose like he's forcing himself upright.

"No… I think I need to be alone right now. Get my head straight."

He steps inside. Starts to close the door.

Then stops.

"Thanks."

Charlie frowns, genuinely confused. "For what?"

Todd looks straight at him, eyes shining in the dim corridor.

"For not… hating me," he murmurs. "For not treating me… any differently."

Ah. That.

The confession from earlier.

What Todd had said, had confirmed, in words so bravely.

Unveiling the truth he couldn't hide anymore.

His love for Neil. The ache of it.

The secret he's been carrying, maybe since Neil, maybe years before.

A lump forms in Charlie's throat.

To Charlie, it isn't complicated.

It doesn't change a damn thing.

His friends are his friends.

He loves them.

And Todd makes Neil happy.

He makes him so, so, *so* happy.

Charlie has never seen Neil take to anyone like that.

Not that quickly.

Not that fiercely protective.

Not like he wants to stand between Todd and the world.

In Charlie's book, Todd is the bee's knees.

There was never going to be a question of hating him.

"Nothing to thank me for," Charlie says simply. "You deserve to be happy, Todd. *Whatever* that entails."

Todd's breath hitches, the smallest sound of relief, and he nods.

"Goodnight, Charlie."

"Night, Todd."

The door clicks shut.

Charlie stands there a second longer, staring at the wood, listening to the silence on the other side.

The night's events circle in his head until he's almost dizzy from them.

Neil had been lighter than Charlie has seen him for a very long time.

He'd always loved make-believe; as boys he would disappear into their games so completely that Charlie half-believed they were real.

Knights. Circus performers. Pirates.

Somehow Neil always made the world feel wide, like anything could happen.

But tonight had been something else entirely.

On stage, Neil wasn't *pretending*. He wasn't hiding.

He was lit from the inside, bright and fearless.

Puck lived through him: mischievous, wild, impossible to catch.

Charlie had felt something akin to hero-worship watching from his seat.

It wasn't pride in the way a friend is proud.

It was sharper, deeper, a shock of awe that left him almost winded.

He'd thought he knew Neil.

Tonight proved he didn't.

Or rather: he'd never seen Neil without that usual weight on his back.

Untethered. Unmasked. Unburdened.

For a few sweet hours, Neil had been *free*.

If only he could have always been.

If only he were now.

He can't let Neil be alone with Tom Perry.

He just can't.

It's that gut feeling, that cold dread that's been gnawing at him ever since he first realised how much Neil cared for his roommate.

What if this isn't just about the play?

What if Tom *knows*… or at least senses the rest of it?

Charlie doesn't think he'd hurt Neil physically… not in the way people might picture, but the way he looked at him tonight… that cold, sharp wrath.

Like disappointment wasn't enough.

Like he wanted to stamp something out of his son.

If he could berate Neil in public without shame, what might happen behind a locked door?

Tom's rage isn't new. Even as boys, Charlie had seen how he treated

the smallest accidents, the slightest weakness. There was no mercy.

Not then.

Certainly not now.

And now… now there's more at stake.

Tom could send Neil away.

Rip him from Welton.

Throttle whatever light had finally bloomed in him.

Or worse… try to "fix" him. God knows what that would entail.

That thought makes Charlie's stomach twist.

Neil's danger isn't only paternal. There's the larger, invisible threat that lives in the walls of every boys' school… the whispers, the stares, the men who notice tenderness and decide it's wrong.

Decide it needs whipping out.

Todd beside Neil makes everything sharper.

If anyone ever wanted to make an example of them, it wouldn't be *Charlie* who paid.

It would be Neil.

Or Todd.

Charlie can't bear either thought.

He can't go back to his room and pretend everything's fine.

Not tonight.

Not when it might not be.

He glances at the grandfather clock in the hall.

12:38 a.m.

Way past curfew.

He'll be in serious trouble if he's caught outside the dorms.

And if Mr. Perry sees him anywhere in the vicinity of the house… well, Charlie doesn't want to imagine that conversation.

For a moment he almost turns back.

Almost decides to wait until morning.

Sleep on it. Make a plan when things don't feel so raw.

But then Neil's face flashes across his mind, stunned, hollow, that awful nothingness.

No.

Not after that.

Fuck it.

He'll chance it.

It's a half-hour walk to the Perrys'.

If he runs, less.

They can't have been home long.

With any luck, Mr. Perry will be asleep by the time he gets there.

He just needs to see Neil.

Needs to know he's alright.

Needs to tell him how brilliant he was tonight.

How he lit up the world.

Before he can talk himself out of it, Charlie bolts down the hallway, thunders down the stairs into the main lobby.

The main doors are locked, but the staff lounge has a back exit that leads to the grounds.

Perfect.

He makes his way there, praying to every god that he doesn't believe in that the lounge will be empty.

Maybe someone left a lamp on.

Maybe a janitor is sweeping.

Maybe a prefect is waiting to pounce.

Every possibility feels like a hand on his collar.

He rounds the corner.

Empty.

Thank you gods.

Though he startles as he steps in, hears a rustle and a squeak, he turns quickly and when he sees the cage in the corner, his body sags in relief.

It's just the lab rats, pale little ghosts twitching in their cage, noses pressed to the wire, whiskers trembling.

Charlie lifts a hand in apology.

"Sorry, fellas," he whispers, as though they might squeak out his secrets.

The quiet hum of the building presses in.

The clock ticks somewhere down the hall. Even the air feels like it's watching.

He finds the back door.

Tests the handle.

Unlocked.

For a second, he just stands there.

Heart hammering.

Cold sweat prickling beneath his collar.

Once he steps through, there's no turning back.

If someone sees him, that's detention for at least the rest of the school year.

Maybe worse, expulsion.

Sure, the Daltons could smooth it over. They always do. Money fixes most things.

But that won't last forever. One day his father will put his foot down, and Charlie will be out of luck.

Right now though, he doesn't care.

Neil is worth any personal risk.

He's worth everything.

Charlie inhales.

Then pushes the door.

Night air hits him like a slap.

Wet. Black. Frozen.

Without a second thought, he exhales…

And runs.

Chapter End Notes

Why is this coming so soon you may ask… wellll dear readers, I've had this drafted for two months LMAOO and so are the next few sequences.

The rest all need a bit of tweaking and I have a busy week ahead but no fear, I'll find ways to get them out asap.

Also *edit* to say I finally updated this fics description LMAOO,

it’s about damn time, was stuck in the planning phase still.

Chapter 39: Chapter 39.

Chapter Notes

So uh this one is kinda depressing, be warned.

I feel the need to give a light **TW**
for suicidal ideation but nothing explicit.

I'll be back VERY soon I promise with some hope, but for now I hope you uh… enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil.

It was finally here.

The moment he'd feared, somewhere deep in his soul, for longer than he could name.

The moment he would snap.

For years there had been a warning light burning inside him, dim at first, then constant, then unbearable.

A quiet insistence that something was wrong, that he was being bent into a shape that would not hold.

Tonight, it had gone silent.

He didn't need it anymore.

It was *over*.

Everything was over.

He stands in his bedroom for a long moment, unmoving.

The folded laundry laid carefully on his bed.

The sheets tucked tight beneath the mattress, hospital-corner neat.

Order everywhere.

Control.

The bookshelf catches his eye, trophies lined up in obedient rows, their bronzed surfaces dull in the low light.

They mock him.

Shining proof of all the times he'd been told *this should be enough*.

That winning meant achievement.

That achievement meant worth.

That worth would eventually become happiness, if he waited long enough. Worked hard enough.

He waited.

It never did.

Nothing in this room feels like joy.

Not the framed photograph on his desk, himself standing stiff between his parents, hands folded politely behind his back, uniform pressed to perfection, hair slicked neatly into place.

A picture of success.

The Perrys beside him unsmiling.

His father stands rigid, jaw tight, already displeased by something unnamed.

There is always something.

His mother looks smaller than he remembers.

Carefully blank.

Her face held in place like porcelain, emotion smoothed away until nothing remains.

A mask.

Just like the one she'd worn as she'd knelt beside him only moments ago.

She hadn't said a word of encouragement.

No comfort.

No reassurance.

Just a quiet, tired instruction:

"*Go on. Get some sleep*."

The resignation in it had been unmistakable.

Neil knows she didn't want this outcome either.

Not this ending, not the consequences.

But she has no power here.

No nerve.

And her last attempt, the night before, hadn't really been to save him.

Only to keep him quiet.

To keep the peace.

To tranquillise Tom.

To put an end to his rage.

It hadn't worked.

It never would have.

He couldn't have held this inside himself any longer.

It would always have come to this… today, tomorrow, a year from now.

Something would have broken.

He turns back to the photograph, studying the boy trapped inside the frame.

He looks so small.

So contained.

Already folded into submission.

That boy had learned early how to stand still.

How to be agreeable.

How to disappear inside expectations.

He had never stood a chance.

Soon this frozen version of him is all that will be left.

To Tom Perry, this is who he always was.

A framed depiction.

A promise.

A glamour without substance.

A reflection without depth.

A shadow cast by someone else's light.

He reaches out and touches the glass, fingers trembling faintly.

It's cold, hollow.

He needs to feel real.

Just for a few moments more.

He stands shirtless from his half-hearted attempt to change, the fabric of his shirt abandoned on the chair like it doesn't belong to him anymore.

For a moment, a brief, stupid moment, he considers climbing back into bed.

Pulling the covers up.

Sleeping this nightmare off.

But the morning will come.

And with it, that fate.

That walk to the execution block.

He leaves the bed and crosses to the window, fingers numb as he pulls

it open on both sides.

Winter air floods the room.

Snow.

Stillness.

That sharp, clean cold that makes his lungs ache.

He closes his eyes and breathes it in, like he might be able to carry it with him.

Memories come then.

Not gently.

All at once.

He needs them.

Needs to gather them up, press them into himself, stitch them under his skin before it's too late.

He needs to remember everything.

And it doesn't surprise him, not really, that his happiest moments don't include his family.

His flesh and blood.

His mother appears only briefly, flickering in and out like an old photograph.

Her laugh during a silly game, Neil breathless with excitement as he plays at being a knight of the Round Table. Protector of the realm. Defender of what is right.

She'd smiled then.

Encouraged it.

Before she learned to fear it.

Tried to gently coax it out of him.

He doesn't linger.

He loves her. He always will.

But she never knew him. Not really.

Not as he was.

Not as he is.

And she never will now.

There were only a few people who ever truly saw Neil Perry.

The first, the very first, was Charlie.

His best friend.

His brother.

They had grown up together so completely that sometimes Neil can't remember where one of them ended and the other began.

Two boys flashing through his mind now in broken pieces…

bare feet on hot pavement,

sword-fighting with twigs,

knees scraped raw and bleeding,

both of them being scolded by their kindergarten teacher while they laughed behind their hands.

Charlie's laugh is always the loudest in the memory.

There's a moment… small, sharp… of Charlie hugging him out of nowhere one afternoon, arms tight, almost painfully.

You're not bad, he'd said, *you're amazing.*

Your dad just doesn't see you right. I do though. I do.

Neil's chest tightens painfully at that one.

He hadn't known it then, but Charlie had already been fighting for him. Already choosing him.

And had never stopped.

He thinks of their first day at kindergarten.

Two terrified boys, hands clammy, hearts hammering, clinging to each other like shipwreck survivors.

Because before that, neither of them had ever really had anyone.

Charlie made everything feel lighter.

Like life was something to be played with, not endured.

Everyone else thinks he doesn't take anything seriously.

Oh Charlie, they say, *what an enigma.*

What a self righteous joker. A clown. Not one serious bone in that body of his.

Neil knows better.

Charlie is the most loyal person he has ever known.

Selfless in a way people mistake for recklessness.

Willing to stand in the fire if it means his friends don't burn.

The thought almost breaks him.

He hopes, desperately, that Charlie will one day forgive him for this.

For leaving. One way or another, both as terrible as the other.

The last image of him flashes again, unbidden:

Charlie half out of his skin, trying to pull him from the car, eyes wild, voice breaking as he fought for him like he always has.

Always in his corner.

Always loving him in that chaotic, perfect way that only Charlie can.

His last memory of him.

A *horrible* image to leave him with.

Neil presses his forehead to the cold glass, breath fogging the window.

He loves that boy more than he could ever say, his gratitude for him is

something he'll truly never be able to express.

He hopes Charlie knows though… truly knows he was the best part of Neil's childhood.

The only part that ever felt like joy.

The only part that felt like freedom.

And God… *God*…it hurts to know he won't see him again.

Any of them.

Knox comes next.

Tall, earnest Knox, who had sidled up to them on that first day of elementary school and asked, without ceremony or fear, if they wanted to be best friends.

As though it were the simplest thing in the world.

He'd always been like that, an open soul, a lover at heart.

A boy who fell easily and completely, who wore his feelings like a badge.

Knox, who had a new crush every week.

Knox, who cried when he stepped on a caterpillar and insisted on holding a funeral for it in the schoolyard.

Charlie and Neil had gone along with it, of course. Following the procession, comforting Knox as he cried. Charlie punching the lights out of a kid who called Knox a wuss.

They'd had his back.

They always did.

The three of them had loved each other so thoroughly, even then, before they had words for it.

Before the world taught them restraint.

How friendship should be.

He sees them again at Welton, the three of them clinging together on

that first day, three terrified ten-year-olds pretending not to shake.

Unaware of all the pressure waiting for them.

Of how much joy would be scraped away, year by year.

Meeks follows.

Little genius Meeks, transferring in at twelve.

A scholarship kid. Like Neil.

His parents had fought tooth and nail to get him there.

He'd been a breath of fresh air, sidling up to them after one disastrous pop quiz, peering down at Neil's paper and saying, simply, "*I can help.*"

And that had been that.

A lifeline.

Funny, sweet, bluntly practical, and kind in a way that never asked for thanks.

Pitts comes with him.

Quiet Pitts. Steady Pitts.

Always laughing at Meeks's jokes, his nose crinkling with disgust the day they pranked Nolan with sardines in his desk.

Neil smiles faintly at that one.

Cameron is harder.

Blunt. Serious. Forever taking Charlie's bait. Forever desperate to be one of Welton's greats.

So afraid of slipping that he held himself rigid.

And yet… sometimes, albeit rarely, Cameron would loosen. Laugh. Say something reckless.

Become someone else, just for a moment.

Neil hopes he won't share his fate.

And then…

Todd.

The thought of him splinters Neil's chest, sharp and sudden, like something breaking clean through bone.

Sweet, lovely Todd.

The last person to enter his life, and the one who had attached himself most inexplicably, irrevocably, to Neil's soul.

With Todd comes the happiest memories of all.

The first time Neil saw his beautiful face, standing stiff between his parents on his first day at Welton.

Just *months* ago.

Could it really have only been months?

Mere months of loving Todd in a way Neil hadn't known was possible.

Loving him so wholly.

The first time their hands touched, that handshake that felt like a vow.

How Neil had immediately found himself unable to be parted from him, roping him into all of their group activities.

He thinks of his shyness, his lack of confidence, of how he's bloomed over the months, thanks to Keating.

The tremor in Todd's voice whenever he tried to speak more than three words at once. But how profound those words were once he loosened up.

How beautiful he looked up there, reciting poetry, stammering as though his words weren't the most powerful Neil had ever heard.

His laughter the night they threw the desk set, that first real glimpse into the world he kept hidden.

How Neil realised in that moment that his roommate was more than a friend to him… he was everything.

Hopes he'll cling to their existing memories.

The night Todd melted into him when Neil asked about his poem.

The night Neil made it clear that girls were not for him.

The fragile, dangerous hope that had bloomed in Todd's eyes then.

He thinks of Todd's soft skin, how his forehead had felt beneath his lips.

His nose, so cute, the way it twitches like a bunny rabbit when he's concentrating. How badly Neil wants to kiss it, and all the freckles that dust it.

His eyes.

God, his eyes.

Deep as water catching light.

How they look at him.

Eyes that found Neil's and held him there, steady and unflinching.

Eyes that saw him.

Eyes that promised understanding without ever demanding explanation.

That stubborn curl he tries to tame every morning before school.

The first time Neil touched it, the way Todd had frozen, eyes wide, breath caught, as Neil's fingers brushed his hairline in that small childhood bedroom.

How his face would brighten at the smallest praise.

His words, scrawled into notebooks, tucked away like secrets. The world distilled through his careful, observant lens.

Todd was so smart.

Quietly wise.

And utterly blind to it.

Neil knows, with a clarity that hurts, that Todd will survive this.

Todd is strong in ways he doesn't see yet. He will keep going. He will write. He will love again, maybe.

But something will change.

He will hurt.

So much, he can't bear to think of it.

Todd will carry this with him, the unanswered questions, the moments that almost were.

He will wonder if he should have said something sooner. Kissed him longer. Held on tighter.

Neil hates the thought of that weight settling on Todd's shoulders.

Hates that he will become another quiet thing Todd learns to fold inside himself.

He wishes, selfishly, that he could leave Todd with certainty instead of absence.

With answers instead of silence.

But this is all he has to give him now.

Their first kiss, only hours ago.

How right it had felt.

How inevitable.

The way Neil's entire body had come alive in those brief, stolen moments.

The heat.

The daring.

The look they'd shared before parting, full of promise. Of almost.

Almost lovers.

Almost.

They should be together now.

They should be stealing time from the world, hiding in each other's arms, making up for everything they'd been denied.

If he's forced into Braden… he knows it.

Knows it with terrifying certainty.

He will never have this again.

He's young, but he understands this much: a love like Todd's is rare.

Once in a lifetime.

He *should* have kissed him sooner.

Months ago.

That first day.

Should have said to hell with fear. With expectation.

They should have had more time.

But at least… at least he'd had that one moment with him.

That one perfect truth.

It's more than he ever thought he'd be allowed.

He draws in a shaky breath.

Neil understands something now, with terrible calm.

He tried obedience.

It hollowed him out.

He tried defiance.

It brought him here.

Condemned.

There is no version of this world where he is allowed to be both alive and free.

No waiting it out.

No compromise.

No future where time softens his father's hold.

This isn't a crossroads.

It's a corridor with the walls closing in.

And Neil is tired of pressing himself flatter and flatter just to fit through.

He's let the Captain down.

He seized the day… but not enough.

Not enough to save himself.

Now there is nothing left to seize.

The chains are already on him.

Invisible, but unbreakable.

For the rest of his days.

Tom Perry will never loosen his grip.

Never soften.

Never let him go.

Not now he knows everything.

Freedom isn't waiting somewhere down the road.

Freedom was a moment.

A stage.

A breath.

And it's already gone.

Puck's crown of thorns waits on the windowsill, pale in the moonlight.

An offering.

A penance.

A promise kept.

He needs to be him for a second longer.

Losing him almost feels worse than losing the rest of it. Neil has barely existed as himself.

But Puck…

Puck was always true. *Puck* was always free.

He lifts the crown, sets it upon his head. His eyes linger on the snowfall outside, soft and soundless. Then they close.

He breathes in.

For a moment, he's *there*, deep in the forest of Athens.

The air alive with magic, the scent of moss and twilight.

Trees stretch high above him, fireflies drift like stars caught in branches.

He can hear the laughter of other fae, the rush of a hidden stream.

He is loyal to his master Oberon, but mischief, joy, wonder, all belong to him.

He is free to weave chaos and delight, to dance unbound beneath the moon.

Maybe that's where he'll go.

Somewhere in that forest.

Flowers blooming over every stone, water tumbling over rock.

The world soft, green, endless.

The only sounds flooding his ears, birdsong, the flutter of wings, the hush of wind through leaves.

Or maybe he'll go to another world entirely.

One where he's born of *love*, not duty.

A world where he can be whoever he wants.

Where he can love freely.

He hopes...

God, he hopes, that Todd is there too.

Some incarnation of that precious soul, one he can be with.

Forever this time.

That somehow, somewhere, they'll find each other again. In a better life. A better world.

One that would accept men like them.

Maybe it's better this way.

Maybe the danger will cease once he's gone.

He stands, the crown still upon his head, and steps away from the window.

Puck fades from him, gently, like mist dissolving in dawn.

Neil whispers a quiet goodbye, to the forest, to Puck, to himself.

He knows where the gun is kept.

Where his father hides the key.

The second he enters the study, he's numb.

He wasn't lying earlier.

He feels nothing.

Nothing at all.

No fear.

Only certainty.

He should have known.

Some stories are never allowed a second act.

And this was always how his would end.

Chapter End Notes

Just a lil authors note to say I was struggling a little, recently with my confidence in this fic and my ability to do justice to these next parts. Thinking everything so far isn't good enough or boring etc. But then always having your lovely comments saying that you do enjoy it does really help, so thank you anyone who ever has. I will see this fic through no matter what haha so don't worry, my self doubt won't ruin that.

I have another fic drafted, my modern AU, which will be very different to this one and much shorter, but fairly angsty (not in a Neil dies way dw). I hope to post the prologue chapters of that soon but know when those come that doesn't mean this one is over.

I still have a lot planned for this fic, as well as a potential follow up, but sorry if it is dragging on to anyone.

I never intended for this fic to be so long but it really has taken such shape for me and so I can't seem to stop haha!

I just hope some of you are enjoying the ride.

Anyway love you guys and see you very very soon <3

Chapter 40: Chapter 40.

Chapter Notes

> Happy almost Christmas week everyone!!
>
> I hope I'll be posting again soon but forgive me if I don't haha obviously a very busy time of year.
>
> The next few pivotal chapters are almost fully drafted I just need to work out chronology and some wording and I'm a perfectionist when it comes to this fic so knowing me I'll do some rewrites haha!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd.

When the door clicks shut behind him, Charlie left in the hallway, Todd lets the tears fall freely.

His heart feels cracked in two.

Half of it was dragged away into the night, wrapped in barbed wire, led to an execution block.

The other half remains here. In the dim dorm room. Two identical beds. One empty.

He can't bear it.

He wants to scream. He wants to throw something. He wants to run out into the snow and drag Neil away from that house with his bare hands.

He wants to run with him. Far far away. To say fuck it. To abandon all expectation and just *be*.

They could go to New York. Boston. Canada.

Or anywhere.

Not far, but far enough to never be found.

He knows it's a silly thought, that it would be difficult… maybe even impossible, but right now all he wants is to be with Neil forever, however that might look, wherever that might be.

He wants Neil to *act*. To be the person he is. An actor. A muse.

His muse.

How is he supposed to stand this?

How can he be here, when Neil is not?

How will he know if he'll see him again?

Those soulful eyes, filled with love and light, how they see right into him.

Oh, how he loves him.

Desperately.

How he'll never love anyone else. He's sure of it. Now his lips have touched Neil's, he's ruined for anyone else.

He needs to remember every detail of him.

The curve of his mouth.

The way his eyes look like the Milky Way when Todd gazes into them.

How his hands feel around him, little sparks jumping whenever their fingers brush.

The way he laughs, with his whole body, face bright and unguarded.

The way his nose crinkles just slightly when he catches Todd's eye across a room.

How he always seems to know, somehow, when Todd is out of sorts.

He's *so* beautiful.

Every single fibre of him.

His face.

His mind.

His soul.

Todd digs for words, any words, something he can hold onto, something solid enough to conjure Neil fully in his head.

He flips open his notebook, searching for a blank page, desperate to spill the anguish somewhere it might fit.

I can't forget him, I can't forget him, I can't—

But his hand stills.

A number, written crookedly in the margin.

Scribbled days ago.

The landline for Jeffrey's new holiday place in Vermont.

Technically it's the outhouse of the family estate, but it's enormous.

As a kid, Todd had always imagined himself living there one day. A place entirely his own.

Quiet.

Somewhere he could read in peace and go unnoticed for the rest of his life.

Of course, it had been given to Jeffrey outright.

Todd suspects that most of the reason is simple. Their parents miss having him close now that he's moved away. Well… they don't miss *him*, exactly. They miss the prestige. The way Jeffrey's presence reflects back on them.

That's Todd's theory, anyway.

His mother had called just last week to tell him all about it.

"You should see how he's decorated the place, Toddy. He has impeccable taste."

Todd had nodded along, like he always does. Scribbled the number and the address down without thinking. Forgotten all about it.

Until now.

Todd stares at the numbers. His breath shortens.

It's past midnight.

It would be silly to call.

Ridiculous.

Except… desperation makes it feel necessary.

Jeff went to Harvard.

Jeff knows people.

Jeff moves through the world without anyone stopping him.

Maybe… just maybe… he could help.

Todd slips back into the hallway.

Quiet.

Charlie must have gone to bed. He almost considers waking him but Cameron might be back, and he'd probably not be so pleased.

The phone is at the end of the corridor. If he's caught using it at this hour that's a demerit, detention, punishment of some kind.

But this is *Neil*.

Todd finds he doesn't care.

Anything.

Anything for Neil.

For Neil's future.

For Neil's happiness.

It seems almost silly, calling his brother.

They don't talk often. It's never what they've done.

But Jeffrey's actions of late have demonstrated that he wants to change that.

The watch.

Talking with Neil about Todd's time at Balincrest.

Asking him to be his best man.

It all points to wanting to mend the bridge that's been between them.

Besides… earlier that day, Jeffrey had teased Todd about Neil. Not cruelly, not judgementally.

But almost like a normal big brother ribbing a little sibling with a crush.

It'd made him feel normal for a split second.

Like his feelings aren't an abomination.

Maybe he'll understand.

And good God, it would be nice to have someone in his family on his side.

Todd tiptoes down the hallway.

Every creak of the floorboards sounds like an alarm.

He forces himself forward.

Focus.

He needs to get his words together.

He needs to call.

He dials quickly, the rotary making tiny clicks, but to Todd it still sounds too loud as he keeps darting his eyes, terrified that Hager will round the corner, scream in his face.

He doesn't think he can handle much more stress tonight.

It feels like a long shot as the tone rings out, that Jeffrey will even answer a phone call at this hour, but only four rings later, a gravelly voice is in his ear.

"Nm-Huh-llo?"

"Jeffrey?" He whispers frantically.

The sound of his brothers voice appears to rouse Jeffrey a little. “Todd?? What’s wrong? Did something happen… Are you okay?”

His panic would normally surprise Todd, but he realises he’s NEVER called Jeffrey. Not even under normal circumstances during the daytime.

“Uh… I’m okay. Well—kind of. Um…”

He sounds worse than he expected. His voice is rough, scraped raw, tears pressing hard against his throat. He swallows, but they don’t go away.

“Todd,” Jeffrey says, fully awake now. His voice is steady, yet alert. “I’m worried. What’s happened?”

Todd wouldn’t be surprised if he’s already halfway to grabbing his keys.

That wouldn’t help. Not at this hour.

So he inhales, shakily, and tells him.

Everything.

He tells him about Keating. About standing on desks, about *Carpe Diem*, about the poem coaxed out of him when he hadn’t thought he had anything worth saying.

About how something inside him had shifted after that, how alive he’s felt since.

About the Dead Poets Society. The cave. The meetings. The boys. The way he finally feels like he belongs somewhere.

He tells him about Neil.

About his love for acting, the way he’d burst into their room breathless with excitement. About defying his father. About the lies, the pressure, the future already carved out for him, Harvard, medicine, obedience.

About how trapped Neil has always been.

About Keating seeing him. Helping him see himself.

And then, the part that makes Todd’s hands shake…

He tells him about falling in love.

About how it wasn't planned. How it felt inevitable.

About realising it was mutual.

About the way Neil looks at him like he matters.

Like he's something precious. About how safe he feels with him.

How beautiful Neil is, inside and out.

He tells him about the dance.

About holding each other.

About the kiss.

And the ones that followed.

About how right it felt. How natural.

Like something clicking into place.

About Puck.

About the performance.

About how proud he was.

About how he'd meant to tell Neil all of it tonight.

About Neil being dragged away.

About the hollow look in his eyes.

About the fury in his father's.

About how it feels like something has been ripped clean out of Todd's chest.

About the fear that won't let him breathe.

About Charlie, too. How he's known, how he's protected them, how kind he'd been when Todd finally said the words out loud.

Todd talks until there's nothing left in him.

On the other end of the line, Jeffrey doesn't interrupt. He just listens. The soft sounds of breathing, an occasional sniff, proof he's still there.

When Todd finally stops, his heart is hammering.

He's done it.

He's said it.

He's told his brother, clearly, unmistakably, that he loves another boy. That he's *kissed* him.

He's terrified.

It's a risk. A huge one.

But it feels necessary.

There's a pause. Long enough that Todd's stomach twists.

Then Jeffrey exhales.

"Thank you," he says quietly. His voice is rougher than before. "For trusting me."

The emotion in his voice almost floors Todd. He knows in that moment that he's safe. Jeffrey is safe.

Todd's breath stutters. "I—I didn't know who else to call. I'm so scared, Jeff. I'm so—so scared."

"You're afraid he won't be allowed back?" Jeffrey asks gently.

Todd shakes his head, even though he knows Jeffrey can't see it. His fingers curl tighter around the receiver, knuckles aching.

"No… well, I'm not sure," he whispers. "But I *am* afraid he'll hurt him. Mr. Perry, I mean. He—"

His voice catches. He presses his forehead to the cool wall beside the phone, breath stuttering as another wave of tears threatens.

"He seemed so *mad*," Todd manages. "So much worse than I expected. And I'm—"

He stops. Forces himself to breathe. In through his nose, out through his mouth, like Keating taught them.

“Jeff,” he says quietly. “I’m worried he’ll know. About us. About… about what we are. About—”

The word slips out before he can stop it.

“Our love.”

It hangs there, fragile and undeniable.

Todd flushes, even alone in the dark hallway, heart racing, but the word feels right. Truer than anything else he’s said all night.

There’s no point denying it now.

“His father will want to stop him acting,” Jeffrey says after a beat.

Not a question. A certainty.

Todd nods again, then huffs out a small, humourless breath when he remembers. “Yes. That’s… that’s a guarantee.”

Jeffrey sighs, long and heavy. “God. The poor kid. He’s so bright. He has so much light in him.” A pause. “I could see it when he stayed with us. Even then.”

Todd swallows. His chest aches at the validation, not just of Neil, but of *them*.

“I don’t know what to do, Jeff,” he admits. “He deserves to choose his own life. And I don’t know how I’m supposed to bear it if he can’t.”

“I know,” Jeffrey says softly. “I know.”

There’s a moment of silence, filled only by Todd’s uneven breathing and the faint hum of the dorm at night.

“Listen,” Jeffrey continues. “It’s *really* late, kid. You sound exhausted.”

“How can I sleep?” Todd blurts. “How can I—how can I close my eyes not knowing if he’s okay? Jeff, how can I—”

“*Todd Oliver Anderson.*”

The full name cuts through the spiral like a hand on his shoulder.

“Listen to me,” Jeffrey says firmly, but not unkindly. “Tomorrow, I’ll start making calls. Admissions. Contacts. Anyone who’ll listen. I’m in

good standing. I can help steer this. I *will* help steer this."

Todd squeezes his eyes shut.

"I'll handle it," Jeffrey continues. "I *promise* you, we'll make this okay. But you—" He softens. "You never put yourself first. You run yourself into the ground trying to save everyone else."

Todd's throat tightens.

"But—" he tries.

"*But*," Jeffrey cuts in gently, "you need to take care of yourself, kid. You're no good to Neil if you're running on fumes."

Todd slumps slightly against the wall.

"Try to rest," Jeffrey says. "Even if you can't sleep. Maybe… maybe grab one of his sweaters. Or a shirt. Keep it with you." A small, fond smile creeps into his voice. "That's what Addie does when I'm away for work."

Todd huffs out a quiet, embarrassed laugh. He blushes at the comparison, Addie and Neil, spoken in the same breath, but the warmth it brings is real, spreading through his chest despite the cold still clinging to him.

Their love is just as valid as Jeffrey and Addison's, that's what he's telling him, and it feels healing.

It feels important.

"Okay," he whispers. "Okay. I'll… I'll try."

"I'll come by tomorrow," Jeffrey says. "Probably in the afternoon. I'll call around first thing. Alright?"

"Alright," Todd murmurs. "Jeff… *thank* you."

"No," Jeffrey says immediately. "I mean it… Todd I—I haven't stepped up before."

Todd opens his mouth to protest, but Jeffrey doesn't let him utter another syllable.

"No. *Please*. I don't deserve your forgiveness yet. I let Mom and Dad treat you like crap for years. I didn't protect you when I should have."

His voice wavers, just slightly.

“But I am now,” he says. “That’s a promise, Toddy bear.”

The sound of the old nickname, from a time when it felt like they were real brothers, not just two boys raised under the same roof, makes something in Todd’s chest loosen.

Maybe they can be again.

They say their goodbyes, Jeffrey reiterating his promises, steady and sure.

When Todd returns to the bedroom, his heart is still heavy, but not crushingly so.

The weight has shifted. A problem shared is a problem halved, or whatever that old saying is. He’d never believed it before tonight.

Maybe he doesn’t have to move through life feeling like a burden just for existing.

Maybe he can stop seeing himself as an inconvenience.

Keating.

Neil.

Charlie.

The other poets.

They’ve all shown him the same thing in different ways: that he *matters*. That he is allowed to take up space.

And now Jeffrey, his brother, who only days ago had felt impossibly distant.

The perfect son he’d quietly resented. Todd sees him differently now.

He was never as alone as he once thought.

Todd reaches for one of Neil’s sleep shirts and presses it to his face, breathing him in. It smells unmistakably like him, soap and warmth and something soft he can’t quite name. He’s certain Charlie would tease him mercilessly if he ever saw this, but Jeff had been right.

It does help.

Todd buttons the shirt around himself and slips into bed, turning away from Neil's empty one.

He tries to picture him there anyway, the slow rise and fall of his chest, the steady rhythm of his breathing, the quiet thrum of his heart.

He hopes that wherever Neil is right now, whatever has passed between him and his father, he knows this much:

That he is loved.

Deeply.

Fiercely.

That Todd would do anything for him.

Sleep finally takes him, a dimpled smile and a soft, familiar laugh drifting through his thoughts. The phantom press of lips to his forehead. Arms wrapped warm and sure around him.

It feels like only moments have passed when Todd is jolted awake by the sensation of being shaken, hard.

His eyes fly open.

The room is still dark. Still silent.

Not quite dawn.

For a split second, disoriented, he almost convinces himself it was a dream. Some fragment of his imagination bleeding into sleep.

Then the hand grips his shoulder again. Firm. Urgent.

"*Todd*?"

The voice is hushed, strained, barely holding together.

Charlie.

The sound of his name, like that, shattered and wrong, sends adrenaline flooding Todd's system.

He bolts upright.

Charlie is kneeling beside the bed.

He looks wrecked. Like he's been through something violent and barely come out the other side. His hair is soaked through, clinging to his forehead. His coat is gone. His shoulders tremble as if the cold has sunk into his bones.

Dark circles bruise the skin beneath his eyes. Pale tracks of dried tears cut down his cheeks.

He's shaking.

Todd's heart slams against his ribs.

"You're soaked," he breathes, confusion giving way to fear. "Charlie… what's wrong?"

Charlie drags in a breath like it hurts, but no words come.

And Todd *knows*.

The knowing hits him all at once, cold and absolute.

This is about Neil.

Something has happened.

His mind spirals instantly, violently, images crashing over one another with no order or mercy. Neil pulled from the car and struck. Neil bleeding. Neil running into the snow. Neil slipping, falling, not getting back up. Neil in the road, headlights, metal, impact.

Charlie finding him.

Todd's pulse roars in his ears.

"*Charlie*," he whispers, panic clawing up his throat. "What… is Neil… is he hurt?"

Charlie shakes his head too fast. "No. I mean… he's—he is—but not like that."

He falters, words tangling, breath hitching.

Charlie Dalton, speechless.

That terrifies Todd more than anything else.

Charlie.

Two hours earlier.

The cold hits him like a wall, sharp and merciless, but he doesn't slow down.

Luckily, he knows the way, the Perrys don't live far from his own folks.

He must look like a madman, sprinting full speed through the snow in his shirtsleeves, breath coming in clouds, hair plastered to his forehead.

He decides he doesn't care. Let the whole world think he's lost it. It's worth it if it means reaching Neil.

He makes it in twenty minutes, chest heaving, legs trembling.

Not bad, he thinks faintly.

Nice work, Nuwanda.

The house looms ahead, quiet and still beneath the pale glow of the porch light. Most of the windows are dark.

The master bedroom, the one with the great window overlooking the yard, is pitch black.

But one light burns.

Mr. Perry's office.

A warm, flickering glow seeps through the curtains, trembling against the snow outside.

Charlie frowns. That's odd.

Mr. Perry never struck him as the *burning-the-midnight-oil* type. Unless he's not working at all.

Unless Neil's in there.

Being scolded.

Or worse, being broken down, piece by piece.

Charlie's stomach twists.

He *has* to find out.

He has to *see*.

He reaches the window, crouches low, and chances a look inside. His heart hammers so loudly he's sure it'll give him away. One glimpse of Charlie from Mr. Perry, and he'll make things worse for Neil...he *knows* it.

But no.

The office isn't empty, but Mr. Perry isn't in there.

Neil is.

He's sitting at his father's desk. Barefoot. Shirtless. A thin sheen of sweat glints along his shoulders in the faint, flickering lamplight. Something lies on the desk in front of him, covered with a folded piece of cloth.

Charlie frowns.

What is he doing?

Neil's face is blank, eerie in its stillness. He stares straight ahead, unmoving. Not lost in thought...gone. Like his body's here, but the rest of him… isn't.

Charlie's chest tightens.

He calls Neil's name, his breath fogging the glass, but Neil doesn't

even flinch. Doesn't blink.

"*Neil*!" he hisses, louder this time, tapping on the window. No reaction. Panic sparks. He raps harder.

Still nothing.

Then Neil moves. Slowly, mechanically, he reaches forward and lifts the fabric.

Charlie's blood runs cold. Colder than the night air biting at his skin.

In Neil's hands is *Mr. Perry's gun.*

Chapter End Notes

☞☜ don't be mad I love a cliffhanger.

Chapter 41: Chapter 41.

Chapter Notes

> Ho Ho Ho (Santa came late sorry)!!
>
> Hope everyone who celebrates Christmas had a beautiful day! At least better than me who had an insane cold and had to go to bed early.
>
> Anyhoo enjoy the new chapter love y'all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie.

01:10 AM

It feels like time stretches, thin and elastic, as Charlie takes in the full picture.

A gun.

Mr. Perry's gun.

Its existence in itself isn't surprising. He has known about the guns in this house for many years.

Tom Perry liked to brag, voice booming at dinner parties about calibres and safeties and the best places to hide firearms where *"a real man could get to them fast."*

Charlie remembers that dinner so clearly it might as well be happening now.

Their fathers talking almost exclusively about guns, while he and Neil sat stiff and restless at the children's end of the table.

Back then, they were in their cowboy phase, obsessed with comic book heroes and silver screen sheriffs.

At the mention of "*a locked desk drawer*," Neil's eyes had snapped up to meet Charlie's.

A spark.

A silent pact between the two eight year olds.

We're going to find it.

The very next weekend, Tom was away in Illinois on business.

They didn't waste a second.

Saturday afternoon, shoes kicked off at the door, they crept into the study like outlaws on a mission.

Charlie kept watch while Neil rifled through the drawers.

They didn't even have to search long. Within ten minutes, Neil had it.

The key had been tucked lazily inside a cufflink box, as though the thing it guarded wasn't lethal at all. As though it didn't matter.

Even then, Charlie had snorted at that. Already wary of anything Mr Perry handled with casual disregard.

They had lifted the gun out with shaking hands, breathless with the thrill of it. Fingerprints smudged across metal they didn't understand.

Charlie remembers the weight of it. Heavier than it should have been.

Colder, too. A chill that seeped straight into his palms.

Neil's eyes had gone wide with awe.

It didn't feel dangerous to them then. It felt cinematic.

Forbidden, yet exciting.

Like a prop from the movies they loved.

They had been so proud of themselves, so sure they were the heroes in their own story.

Charlie had pointed it dramatically at the bedroom door.

Neil crouched behind him, whispering battle plans like they were under siege.

Monsters and villains down every hallway. Brave last stands.

Breathless giggles. Shaking hands that felt like courage.

Charlie had felt invincible.

Fearless.

Important.

Like power was something you could just pick up if you held it confidently enough.

Then Mrs. Perry had walked in.

Charlie remembers the sound she made. A sharp inhale, like she'd been stabbed.

Not a scream. Not alarm. Something worse. Recognition.

Her face drained of colour so fast it scared him more than any shouting ever could.

Her hands shook as she crossed the room.

She snatched the gun away, clutching it to her chest like it might spring back into their hands if she loosened her grip for even a second.

"*No, baby, no. You cannot touch this. Guns are dangerous. They're very, very dangerous. You mustn't ever touch one.*"

There had been something frantic in her voice. Not anger, but fear.

For a moment the room fell silent.

Neil stared up at her, confused, earnest, like the world had suddenly stopped making sense.

"But Mommy," he asked, voice small and sincere, "*Then why does Daddy have a gun?*"

Charlie remembers the way she froze.

Too long.

Long enough for the truth to slip through the cracks.

Long enough for Charlie to understand she didn't have a solid answer.

She opened her mouth, closed it again.

Something like dread flickered through her eyes before she smothered it.

"*To protect us, lovie,*" she said at last, smoothing her voice into what was meant to sound reassuring. "*In case any bad men ever come.*"

But her smile didn't reach her eyes.

Even then, Charlie had known her words were bullshit.

She didn't believe that.

She just needed them to.

Mr. Perry, a *protector*.

Please.

Charlie had watched him enough times to know better. The way he barked orders.

The way the air changed when he entered a room.

The way Neil seemed to fold inward under his gaze, shoulders curling like instinctive shelter.

No.

Mr Perry didn't keep a gun to *protect* anyone.

He kept it because it made him feel powerful.

Because he could.

Because power was something he hoarded, like control, like silence.

The memory slams back into Charlie with the force of a body blow.

For a moment, he can't breathe.

The sight of the gun in Neil's hands makes the whole world tilt sideways.

His stomach drops.

Why does he have it?

Why does he look so calm?

Why is he sitting like that?

It's Neil's fingers that tell him the answer.

Not frantic.

Not unsure.

Careful. Deliberate.

Like someone who has already decided.

Realisation hits Charlie like ice water poured straight down his spine.

Oh God.

Oh God no.

Charlie doesn't think. He can't.

The windows are useless. Too far. Too slow.

He has to move now.

Charlie bolts.

He runs so hard it feels like his lungs might tear themselves apart, adrenaline roaring in his ears, feet barely touching the ground.

Cold burns along his skin, but he doesn't feel it.

Not really.

He rounds the side of the house, skids toward the back door, and slams into it.

Locked.

Of course it is.

For a split second, panic claws up his throat.

He'll be too late.

He'll hear a bang.

Neil will leave him forever.

He'll be all alone.

Then it hits him.

The spare key.

Hidden beneath the cracked flowerpot on the back step.

A stupid place.

An easy place.

One he and Neil had used before, sneaking out for midnight dares and whispered laughter, slipping back in like they'd cheated the universe itself.

Charlie drops to his knees, hands shaking so hard he nearly knocks the pot flying.

He scrabbles beneath it, fingers slick with sweat, until they close around cold metal.

Come on. Come on.

It takes three tries to get the key into the lock.

Three more eternities.

Then the door gives and Charlie almost falls through it, the impact sending pain up his shoulder.

He doesn't bother to close it.

Cold air floods the hallway behind him.

It doesn't matter.

Nothing matters except Neil.

Charlie's head spins as he sprints through the house, the old floorboards groaning beneath him, every sound too loud, too slow, too late.

His heart hammers so violently it feels like it might crack his ribs from the inside.

The office door looms ahead.

Closed.

There's a thin line of light beneath it, too still, too quiet, like the house is holding its breath.

Charlie doesn't slow.

He doesn't think.

Thinking would mean fear, and fear would mean losing time.

He reaches the door, hand slamming into the wood, and for half a second, just one, he freezes.

He can hear something on the other side.

A breath.

A shift of weight.

Metal brushing skin.

No voices.

No crying.

Just silence.

The wrong kind.

His throat goes dry.

Then he forces the handle down.

The door swings open.

For a single, suspended moment, the world narrows to a snapshot:

Neil seated at the desk.

Back straight.

Eyes distant.

A gun in his hand, raised with terrible, aching calm.

Charlie sees the barrel grazing Neil's temple.

Sees the decision in his posture.

Sees the goodbye forming in his eyes.

Time shatters.

For a moment, Charlie feels like he's seeing every version of Neil at once, the boy he met as a baby, the one who whispered secrets under blankets, the one who laughed too hard at midnight mischief, the one who stood onstage like he was made of starlight… and this version.

This broken one.

This ending.

A single choice.

A single second.

Every future Neil ever dreamed of sits trembling in the curve of his finger.

Charlie's breath stabs painfully in his chest.

No.

Not like this.

Not without a fight.

He screams, voice tearing up his throat, uncaring who hears, uncaring if he wakes the whole damned world.

"*NEIL. NO*!"

Neil startles violently.

The gun slips from his grasp and crashes to the floor with a sickening clatter that echoes like a shot in the tiny room.

Charlie is across the space in an instant, hands grasping at Neil's bare shoulders, dragging him back, holding on like if he loosens so much as a finger Neil might vanish into the air. His grip is desperate, frantic, more plea than restraint.

He’s shaking harder than he ever has in his life.

His pulse is a roar in his ears.

He can’t even hear his own breath.

“What are you doing?” he chokes. His voice splinters. “What are you doing, Neil? You can’t. You can’t do this. You can’t—”

The words don’t sound like his own.

They come out broken.

Raw.

Terrified.

A prayer disguised as a question.

But Neil is alive.

Breathing.

Here.

And for Charlie, in this second, that is everything.

Neil blinks. Once. Twice.

Like a film reel hitching, like something inside him finally fractures.

The fog in his eyes lifts all at once, leaving nothing behind but naked, unbearable grief.

His face crumples.

Then he folds.

His knees buckle without warning, like his body has remembered gravity all at once.

He collapses, not from choice, but because there is no strength left to hold himself up.

Charlie goes with him, there is no decision in it.

Instinct drags him down, arms wrapping around Neil before his skull can meet the floor.

The impact jars them both: bone against bone, breath knocked out of Charlie's chest in a sharp, stunned gasp.

They crumple in a heap on the cold floorboards, a tangle of limbs and shaking breaths.

Neil's weight sags against him, heavy with exhaustion; Charlie braces them both because someone has to.

The gun lies just inches away, abandoned on the wood.

Close enough to touch.

Too close.

Charlie doesn't look at it.

He can't.

If he does, he'll scream.

Neil's body trembles violently in his arms, the aftershock of it all rippling through him in broken, uncontrollable waves.

It feels like his bones are shaking, like his body hasn't caught up to the fact that he's still here.

His hands clutch at Charlie's shirt, fingers curling, uncurling, catching fabric like he's trying to anchor himself to something solid, someone solid, before he slips away again.

Charlie holds him like if he loosens his grip even a fraction, Neil might vanish.

Like the only proof that Neil is alive is the pressure of Charlie's arms wrapped around him. His own breath comes tight and ragged against Neil's shoulder.

He presses his face into Neil's hair, breathing him in, grounding himself as much as Neil. He doesn't realise he's shaking too.

"It's okay," he whispers, raw and hoarse. "It's okay. I've got you. I've got you, Neil."

The words repeat like a mantra, not for comfort, but for survival.

For both of them.

Neil's fingers tighten.

"*Charlie*…"

Just his name. But it splinters something in Charlie's chest.

Neil's voice cracks, thin and broken, nothing like the confident, laughing boy Charlie has known his whole life.

It sounds like someone who's been holding his breath for years and has finally run out of air.

"Oh, Charlie, I'm sorry," he sobs. "God, I'm so sorry. I didn't… I don't want to, I just… there's no… there's nothing… Dad is… he's…"

The words collapse under the weight of them, swallowed by harsh, gasping sobs that tear through him.

He can't finish.

He can't find the breath.

Charlie has never heard him like this.

Not the quiet tears Neil hides behind jokes.

Not the hurt he brushes off with a grin.

Not the moments where he pretends he's fine for everyone else's sake.

This is different.

This is years of pressure collapsing.

This is a life cracking open.

This is a boy crushed under the weight of being someone he was never allowed to be.

Charlie pulls him closer, one arm around his shoulders, the other cradling the back of his neck, thumb pressing steady circles as if he can keep him here by touch alone.

"You're not alone," Charlie murmurs into his hair, voice shaking but certain. "You hear me? You're *not* alone. You've got me. You've got all of us. I swear it."

Neil's breath stutters, uneven and sharp, his forehead pressed into Charlie's collarbone like looking up would destroy him.

Charlie's knees ache against the hard floor. His arms burn from holding on too tight. His whole body hurts.

He doesn't let go.

Neil's sobs come in waves, violent and jagged, like his body is trying to purge the last pieces of hope because it hurts too much to hold.

Charlie rocks him without thinking, cheek to Neil's temple, breathing him in like oxygen.

And in the back of his mind, something keeps pounding:

This isn't finished.

This house is still his father's.

They're still on Perry territory.

This moment is borrowed.

They're lucky, so lucky the Perrys haven't heard, not yet. But if they come down…

If they see this…

If Charlie stays here too long…

Charlie knows.

It'll happen again.

Not tonight, maybe. But soon.

His gaze flicks to the gun on the floor.

Harmless now, but only because they got here first.

His skin goes cold.

So this is where Tom's control ends.

At the barrel of a gun his son thought was the way out.

A spark catches in Charlie's chest.

Not fear. Not anymore.

Rage.

Not the hot, wild kind that wants to break things for fun.

The kind that comes from love.

The kind that comes from almost losing someone you can't live without.

He wants to tear through the house, drag Mr. Perry out of bed, shove him in front of this moment and force him to see what he's done.

To see what he almost lost.

What he nearly destroyed.

But Neil is sagging against him, spent, trembling, the fight drained clean out of him.

Charlie knows that if he moves, if he loosens his grip even for a second, the fragile balance might shatter.

He can't risk it.

Not now.

He swallows hard, the taste of salt and fury sharp on his tongue.

This is bigger than anything he's ever faced.

Bigger than pranks, bigger than detentions, bigger than Welton.

This is life and death.

"I'm here," he whispers fiercely into Neil's hair.

"I'm not going anywhere. We're gonna figure this out. I swear to you. I'm not letting you go. Not tonight. Not ever."

His voice steadies as he speaks, even though inside he feels like he's splitting apart.

But the truth presses in all the same.

He can't do this alone.

He's only seventeen.

He's terrified.

And Neil needs more than just his arms around him.

He needs someone who knows how to keep the sky from falling.

Charlie lifts his head, eyes burning.

Keating.

They need Keating.

Keating.

John startles awake.

For a few disoriented seconds, he doesn't know why.

The room is dark, the faint hum of the radiator the only sound.

A glance at the window shows nothing but black sky; the clock reads *2:03 AM.*

Too early for anything but dreams.

He exhales, sinking back against the pillow, the last remnants of Clara's face still soft in his mind.

Two more weeks and he'll see her again.

Just two more…

The knocking comes again.

Not loud. Not confident. But frantic.

Stumbling. A sound like someone trying to hold themselves together with their fists.

John is on his feet before he's even fully awake, pulling on his dressing gown, bare feet cold on the floorboards.

Knocks at this hour are never trivial.

Fire.

Injury.

A student prank gone wrong.

He half expects McAllister on the other side, breathless with some emergency.

But when he opens the door, the breath leaves him in a rush.

Charlie Dalton stands there…or rather, what's left of him.

His hair is wet, plastered with snow, his eyes rimmed red and swollen.

He's shaking hard enough that Keating can see it from the doorway.

And clutched in his arms, slumped heavily against his chest, is Neil Perry.

Neil is barefoot.

Shirtless beneath Charlie's flannel.

His skin is ashen, his breaths shallow.

He looks like he walked through a storm and forgot to come back from it.

They don't look like boys out after curfew.

They look like survivors.

John's stomach drops.

"Mr. Keating," Charlie manages, voice breaking in the middle. "Please. I didn't know where else to go. He… he almost— I couldn't—"

The sentence shatters in his mouth. Neil's fingers, curled weakly in Charlie's sleeve, finish it without words.

Keating steps back instantly. No questions. No reprimands. No

protocol.

“Come in, boys. Quickly. Before someone sees.”

He ushers them inside, closes the door with a care that borders on reverence, not even the latch dares to click.

They’re too close to the other staff quarters; even a whisper could bring trouble.

He guides them to the bed and pulls the quilt from his sheets, wrapping it around their shoulders, swaddling them in warmth like they’re something breakable.

Neil barely reacts.

Charlie sits rigid, like if he stops touching Neil, the world might come apart again.

Keating takes them in, Neil ghost-pale and hollow-eyed, Charlie fraying at the edges, and feels the familiar pull of duty war with something deeper.

Something older than Welton. Older than authority.

His job would be to go straight to Nolan. To report them. To follow policy.

But policy doesn’t apply to boys who look like they’ve outrun death.

Nolan cannot see them like this.

Nolan would *not* understand.

They’d be in severe trouble, and being reprimanded right now would do nothing for their condition.

Keating rubs a hand over his face, mind racing.

He needs to know what’s happened, know how he can help… but they cannot stay here.

It’s too risky.

There’s too many ears.

It’s too exposed here. But they also cannot be sent back to their dorms

alone.

There's only one place.

"My office," he says at last, voice low but steady. "It's away from the other quarters. And there's a fireplace."

Charlie nods too quickly, like someone drowning who's just been thrown a rope.

Neil doesn't lift his head.

But his fingers tighten in Charlie's sleeve.

Keating catches it, small, but certain.

"Come on," he murmurs, voice gentler now. "Both of you. You're safe with me."

He leads them into the hall.

Charlie half-carries Neil.

They move through the silent corridors as quietly as ghosts.

Keating knows he will have to alert Nolan eventually, protocol, reports, explanations waiting like wolves at the door… but not yet.

Not tonight.

Right now the only thing that matters is heat in their bones and light back in their eyes. Time.

Time to breathe.

Time to talk.

Time to not be alone.

He leads them into his office. The door clicks shut behind them, sealing them away from the rest of Welton.

John crouches before the hearth, striking a match with practiced ease. The flame flares, catches, and the fire begins to build, crackling to life until the room is washed in soft, forgiving gold.

"Sit," he urges quietly.

He guides Neil down onto the rug closest to the fire, front and center, the warmest place in the room. Then he drapes the quilt more securely around his shoulders, tucking it in the way one would for a feverish child.

Neil doesn't speak.

He just stares into the flames, eyes distant, arms locked protectively around himself. His breath shudders now and again, like it isn't sure it wants to stay in his lungs.

It worries John more than any confession could.

This boy, who hours ago was incandescent onstage, radiant with joy and purpose… now looks carved out.

Dimmed.

As if someone has stolen the pilot light from inside him.

Keating shrugs off his robe and presses it into Charlie's hands.

"Here," he murmurs, voice low and steady. "You're shivering."

Charlie nods and slips it on, but the trembling doesn't stop. His hands fist in the fabric as though afraid it might disappear if he lets go.

He keeps glancing at Neil. Not with confusion.

Not with shock.

With the fear of someone who has stood in the doorway between life and death and knows how thin that threshold is.

Keating sees it immediately.

He has seen that look on soldiers.

On parents.

On friends who arrived a moment too late.

He lowers himself to sit beside Charlie, close enough to steady him if he sways, but not so close that the boy feels crowded.

Charlie's face is blotchy, his eyes rimmed in red.

Keating can see the effort it takes not to fall apart completely.

He places a steady hand on the boy's shoulder.

"What happened, Mr Dalton?"

For a moment, Charlie looks as though he might lie.

Might joke.

Might throw on Nuwanda as his mask, the way he always does.

But it slips almost immediately.

His lip trembles. His shoulders cave inward.

"Oh, it was… it was horrible, Mr K." His voice stumbles, breaks. "He… he almost did it. Neil… he almost…" The rest lodges somewhere deep in his throat where language can't get to.

Keating squeezes his shoulder, grounding him. "Easy, lad. You are safe here. Take your time."

Charlie sucks in a breath that shudders all the way through him.

Tears slip freely now.

"I don't know what his father said," he manages, voice shredded thin. "But it must've been bad. Real bad. Worse than anything I imagined. Because Neil would never…"

His breath catches. "He would never try to leave us. Not without a reason. Not without feeling like there was no other choice."

Silence settles heavy between them, the fire popping softly in the hearth.

Keating does not fill the silence.

Some truths are too delicate to crowd.

He does not ask the question forming at the back of his mind.

He already knows the answer.

Neil Perry, the boy who burned so brightly, had come to the edge.

Had looked down.

Had nearly stepped forward.

Jumped.

The realization settles in Keating's chest like ice.

Whatever happened in that house, whatever words were thrown like blades, had driven a boy who lived for the stage, for art, for poetry and beauty… to believe the world had no room for him in it.

It chills him… right to the bone.

It's just what he'd feared as the Perry's car had disappeared from view outside of Henley Hall.

Charlie sees the understanding dawn on Keating's face and it seems to break him open all over again.

Sobs rip through him, harsh and uncontrolled.

Keating pulls him in without hesitation, gathers him close the way one would a younger brother or a frightened child, and holds on until Charlie's shaking begins to ease.

For a long time, neither of them speaks.

The crackle of the fire is the only witness.

It strikes Keating, not for the first time, just how young they all are.

How much weight these boys carry on shoulders never built for it, the expectations, the fear, the endless striving to please.

Children asked to survive worlds that should have nurtured them.

"Oh, Charlie," he murmurs, voice low and steady. "You are a brave young man. So caring. You saved him, do you understand me."

Charlie shakes his head, not trusting it, not ready to believe it.

Keating's hand finds his shoulder again, firmer this time, not just comfort but conviction.

"You stopped something irreversible," he says quietly. "Whatever happens next, whatever comes in the morning, you were there. You made sure he is still here to see it. That matters."

Charlie's breath hitches.

He looks almost ashamed of the tears still clinging to him.

"You did everything you could," Keating adds, gentler now. "Hold on to that. Do not let guilt take the place of what you have done. You were not meant to face this alone, and you do not have to."

For a moment, Charlie just nods, small and exhausted.

"Now sit," Keating says softly. "Warm yourself. I will speak with him a moment, all right?"

Charlie wipes his face with the sleeve of his flannel and sinks into the nearest armchair.

The firelight catches the wet shine on his cheeks, turning it to something almost fragile, almost holy.

He looks utterly wrung out, legs pulled up toward himself as though he is bracing for impact, but he nods.

"All right," he whispers.

The word hangs there, small and fragile, like it might tear if someone breathes wrong.

Silence settles. Heavy. Waiting.

Keating watches him for a beat. Watches the way Charlie's hands still tremble.

The way he keeps glancing at Neil, like he is checking if the boy is real. Present.

Breathing.

Then Keating moves.

He crosses the room and kneels beside Neil, close enough to reach him, not close enough to scare him.

"Neil?" he says gently.

No response.

For a moment, Neil could be made of porcelain.

Still, pale, hollowed out.

His breaths are shallow, almost imperceptible beneath the blanket.

His eyes stare past Keating, unfocused, like he is looking at a place no one else can see.

“Neil,” Keating tries again, quieter. “You are safe now, my boy. You are here with us.”

He hears the tremor in his own voice and forces it to still. His feelings have no place on Neil’s shoulders. Whatever fear or grief he carries, he will carry it himself. Neil must not mistake his pain for guilt or responsibility. He must not think he caused this.

So Keating steadies his breath.

His posture.

His heart.

Because the last thing Neil needs is to see a teacher break and believe he is to blame.

Slowly, as though the effort costs him something, Neil’s gaze lifts.

Those eyes, once bright and hungry for the world, are nothing but ruin now.

Wide.

Dark.

Stripped of everything that made them spark.

They do not recognise the room.

They barely seem to recognise Keating.

Keating feels something inside his chest go cold.

Then Neil blinks. Once. Twice. His fingers twitch against the blanket, as though reaching for something that is not there.

A sound slips from his throat, thin as paper.

And then recognition strikes like lightning.

“Todd,” Neil whispers. The word trembles. Breaks. “I need to see him. Please, I need to see Todd.”

His body folds inward with the plea, like speaking it hurts.

Keating freezes. He understands that need too well. He sees it for what it is, not a whim or a comfort or a childish wish, but the truth.

Todd is his love.

His anchor.

His light in the dark.

Under ordinary circumstances, waking another student at this hour would be unthinkable.

It would be against protocol, against reason, against everything Welton expects of him. And the moment Todd sees Neil like this, it will shake him. It will hurt him. It will change something in him forever.

But Neil is still pleading.

“Please. I *need* him. I need to see his face. Please.” His breath stutters, ragged, like each inhale scrapes his ribs raw. “If I could just see him I… I think I could breathe again.”

The words hit hard. Too honest to be ignored.

Something in Keating shifts. The decision settles like a stone.

Protocol can burn. Let the rules complain in the morning.

He reaches out, steadying Neil with a hand between his shoulder blades, thumb drawing slow, anchoring circles. A touch meant to tether him back to the moment, to remind him: *you are here, you are held, you are not alone.*

“All right,” Keating murmurs at last. The choice is made. “I hear you.”

He looks to Charlie, their eyes locking across the firelight.

“Wake Mr Anderson,” he says quietly. His voice holds steady because it has to. “I think he can give reassurance where we can’t, son.”

Charlie doesn’t hesitate. He rises at once.

One last look at Neil, like he's afraid that if he looks away too long Neil might vanish, and then he slips out into the hall, moving fast.

Keating stays.

His hand stays.

His presence stays.

"He's coming now, Neil," he murmurs. "Everything is going to be all right."

But the words taste like ash. Because he knows how easily the world lies to boys like Neil. Boys who burn too brightly. Boys who dare to want more than obedience.

Boys who were taught to apologise for existing.

Keating has lived that life.

He knows the cage Mr Perry has built, the weight of rules masquerading as love.

He remembers his *own* escape, years ago, the first breath of air that did not belong to someone else.

He wishes Neil had found that breath sooner.

He draws in a slow inhale. "Neil," he whispers.

Neil looks up, wet lashes clinging together, eyes shining. He looks impossibly young.

Keating swallows. The words do not come easy, but they come true.

"I'm just… I'm so… so glad you are still here."

Neil flinches, like the sentence physically hurts him.

"I'm sorry Captain," he breathes. "I'm so sorry."

"Oh, my dear boy," Keating says, voice breaking before he can stop it. "You never have to apologise. Not for anything."

Neil shakes his head. "He won't let me be free again. I'll never get away from him. Not really."

It is the steadiest his voice has been all night.

The certainty in it terrifies Keating more than the emotion did.

Something has to give.

Something has to change.

If the cost is his job, his reputation, every rule the school clings to like scripture, so be it.

Neil's life matters more.

And John Keating will do whatever it takes to protect it.

Chapter End Notes

Expect the next chapter soon, I'm really excited for this one, it may be my fave Todd chapter I've ever written (not to hype it up too much)

EDIT:

For anyone waiting patiently for the next chapter and may be checking this, sorry it's not come yet (it will and hopefully soon). Due to a family emergency I haven't had a chance to properly proof and edit the full chapter but when I am able to, it shouldn't take too long. Love y'all

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!